

Death toll rises to 12 in UPS air disaster in Louisville, Kentucky, involving plane just serviced for cracked fuel tank

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The death toll has risen to 12, including one child, in Tuesday's horrific crash of a UPS cargo plane in Louisville, Kentucky. Sixteen people remain unaccounted for as of this writing.

On Tuesday afternoon, a team of investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) arrived on the scene. In a press conference, officials confirmed that the plane's left engine caught fire and separated from the aircraft during takeoff. The cargo plane, carrying more than 200,000 pounds of jet fuel for its scheduled flight to Hawaii, plowed through a dense industrial district south of the Louisville airport, setting off an inferno that was visible for miles.

The prospect of finding any more survivors is poor. One investigator told reporters that there was not much left of the fuselage that was recognizable because of the intensity of the fire.

The death toll could easily have been orders of magnitude higher. The plane crashed into the Kentucky Petroleum Recycling facility, raising the danger of secondary explosions and fires. Firefighters said they expect to remain on the scene for at least a week to monitor the site and extinguish any flareups.

The area immediately south of Louisville's airport is lined with factories and industrial facilities employing thousands of workers. The site of the crash is only a few hundred yards from Ford's Louisville Assembly Plant, which employs more than 3,000 people. The nearby UPS air cargo facility, known as Worldport, is the company's largest and the central hub of its national logistics network. It is one of the most advanced operations in the company, capable of processing 400,000 packages per hour. Thousands of workers, most of them young part-timers, work at Worldport. UPS even has an agreement with local high schools to provide a steady stream of new labor.

Freight railroad CSX also operates its massive Osborne classification yard immediately west of the airport.

Schools in the area, which were shut down out of fear of toxic chemical release, are set to reopen Thursday. The airport's passenger terminal has also reopened, though only one of its two runways is in operation. The Worldport hub is reportedly shut down for the time being.

More information will emerge as to the circumstances leading to the disaster. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday that the plane, which was 34 years old, had undergone repairs for a cracked fuel tank in September. The model, the MD-11, has the second worst safety record of any commercial aircraft still in service. UPS and FedEx still operate dozens of them, though both companies have begun to phase them out.

What can be said for certain, however, is that ruthless cost-cutting and profiteering by the capitalist ruling class make such disasters inevitable.

One worker from Ford's Kentucky Truck Plant, located several miles east of the crash site, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "It's definitely ridiculous that they put profits over the safety of workers and communities. I don't know a lot about the lifespan of an airplane, but I know most humans expect to retire after 30 years of service. We're very lucky if the cars we buy last 15 to 20 years. All they care about is pleasing shareholders. I see it with Ford where they consider it a failure if they don't make record profits year after year. Just profits aren't good enough—they need to be record-setting."

As if to drive the point home, barely 24 hours after the crash, a massive ammonia explosion occurred at an industrial facility in Yazoo City, Mississippi. All 10,000 of the town's residents were ordered to shelter in place. Miraculously, no injuries or deaths were reported.

The US aviation industry is at the breaking point. While there is no indication that air traffic control issues contributed to this particular crash, the National Airspace System as a whole is stretched to the limit. Generational understaffing among air traffic controllers has been greatly

worsened by the month-long government shutdown. Controllers have been compelled to take leave to find paying jobs rather than work without a paycheck.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced at a news conference Wednesday that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) will reduce flights by 10 percent at 40 of the country's busiest airports as early as Friday if no shutdown deal is reached.

In a bitter irony, the NTSB investigators dispatched to Louisville are carrying out their crucial work without pay. Only a week ago, NTSB chair Jennifer Homendy warned that the shutdown was causing strain on the agency's employees and appealed to the public to identify "resources" (i.e., food pantries and other forms of charity) to assist them. According to the website Flying, the NTSB furloughed 100 people, or 25 percent of its workforce, at the start of the shutdown.

Earlier this year, a series of disasters and near-misses exposed the deepening crisis in US aviation. There have been continual system outages at the air traffic control facility covering Newark International Airport, and in January, a midair collision occurred over Washington D.C. between an American Airlines jet and a military helicopter.

At Boeing, management's criminal disregard for safety has led to the 737 MAX scandal, including two crashes that killed hundreds, and numerous other near misses. In June, a 787 operated by Air India crashed, killing 241 people and leaving only one survivor. India's pilots' union has called for all 787s in the country to be grounded, following another incident last month in which the emergency power system unexpectedly activated.

The MD-11 was originally developed by McDonnell Douglas, which Boeing absorbed in 1997.

These disasters take place amid relentless attacks on the regulatory agencies nominally responsible for safety oversight. At the start of the year, Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) spearheaded a campaign against the FAA, motivated in part by personal feuding with the agency over test flights of the Starship rocket developed by his company SpaceX. Most of these "tests" have ended in fiery explosions.

The Trump White House is asserting sweeping powers over regulatory agencies. Earlier this year, Trump fired Alvin Brown, the board's vice chair, without explanation—a move widely seen as politically motivated. Last month, the Senate confirmed Trump's choice for head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA): former UPS safety executive David Keeling. Plans are also underway to shut down the Chemical Safety Board entirely next year.

These moves are part of the broader social

counterrevolution aimed at overturning all the achievements won by the working class over more than a century of struggle. This is the social content of Trump's drive toward dictatorship. During the government shutdown, Trump has refused to release food stamp funding and threatened to deny back pay to furloughed federal workers.

The corporate oligarchy is simultaneously carrying out a massive jobs bloodbath. Only last week, UPS boasted that it had eliminated 48,000 positions, including 34,000 management jobs. CEO Carol Tomé bragged that the company was "positioned to run the most efficient peak in our history" and that it would "find new opportunities to bring costs down."

The layoffs are part of UPS's automation-driven restructuring program, the "Network of the Future," which introduces new technologies capable of eliminating up to 80 percent of warehouse jobs. In 2023, the company opened its "Velocity" hub, employing 3,000 robots and only 200 human workers.

The presence of Ford and CSX facilities near the disaster site underscores the broader context. Both the auto and rail industries are carrying out layoffs. Automakers are cutting thousands of jobs due to tariff-driven supply chain disruptions and lower-than-expected electric vehicle sales. The railroad industry is notorious for skipping essential maintenance of locomotives and tracks, with cost-cutting on safety measures leading to the East Palestine, Ohio chemical disaster in early 2023.

The role of the union bureaucracy has been to help enforce these layoffs. UPS executives have pointed to the "labor certainty" provided by the 2023 Teamsters contract—passed under false pretenses—as key to their restructuring drive. While the Teamsters bureaucracy has largely maintained silence since then, General President Sean O'Brien has emerged as one of the most vocal supporters of Trump among union officials, who have broadly rallied behind "America First" nationalism.

Such disasters as Monday's crash will continue as long as all decisions affecting safety are subordinated to profit. The catastrophe underscores the urgent need for workers to organize independently to take control over safety and the operations of the major corporations, in order to prevent the continuing toll of mass death.



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