**Headline:** Corporate Profiteering Destroyed the Baltimore Bridge

**Teaser:** The price of corporate compromising on safety is usually paid with taxpayer dollars and immigrant worker lives.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

The collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore has sent shock waves throughout the United States. The bridge was not built to withstand a direct hit from a container ship as large as the [Dali](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/27/us/baltimore-bridge-collapse.html), which brought down the structure within minutes after its engine failed and it became an uncontrollable force drifting toward the bridge.

The incident is a symbol of how unfettered capitalism has resulted in safety concerns becoming secondary to profits.

The Dali, operated by shipping giant [Maersk](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/ship-that-collided-with-baltimore-bridge-was-chartered-by-maersk-2024-03-26/), was carrying more than [800 tons](https://www.bbc.com/news/68691201) of corrosive and flammable materials. Transportation secretary Pete Buttigieg likened the 95,000-ton ship to an aircraft carrier and the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/27/us/baltimore-bridge-collapse.html) explained that “When the bridge was built, cargo ships were not the size they are today.” In fact, such ships have [grown steadily](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/business/economy/container-ships-suez-canal.html) in size over the past few decades. One economist told the Times that shipping companies “did what they thought was most efficient for themselves—make the ships big—and they didn’t pay much attention at all to the rest of the world.” This in turn has forced nations to [expand waterways](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/an-expanded-panama-canal-opens-for-giant-ships/2016/06/26/11a93574-37d1-11e6-af02-1df55f0c77ff_story.html) to accommodate the behemoths, often at the expense of the public.

Some [90 percent](https://www.oecd.org/ocean/topics/ocean-shipping/) of all traded goods that are shipped from one part of the world to the other are transported by water. As corporate appetites for profits have increased, so has globalized trade. And, safety concerns have taken a back seat, as per an investigation published by [Jacobin](https://jacobin.com/2024/03/baltimore-bridge-crash-maersk-whistleblowers).

In 2023, the [U.S. Department of Labor](https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/news%20releases/Maersk-Sec%20Findings%20-FINAL%20071423_Redacted.pdf) investigated a complaint against Maersk and concluded that the company had violated the Seaman’s Protection Act by retaliating against a whistleblower employee. At stake was the fact that, as per the Labor Department, “Reporting Policy requires seamen to report safety concerns to the company and allow it time to abate the conditions before reporting to the [U.S. Coast Guard] or other regulatory agencies.” In other words, Maersk, which is one of the [world’s top shipping companies](https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/10-largest-container-shipping-companies-in-the-world/), tried to protect itself from government regulators.

A similar scenario of compromising safety in service of profits has unfolded at Boeing, one of the [world’s top airplane manufacturers](https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/050415/what-companies-are-major-players-airline-supply-business.asp). After an Alaska Airlines flight in January 2024 was forced to make an emergency landing when the Boeing 737 Max plane lost a panel mid-flight, the New York Times published a bizarrely headlined story: “[Boeing Faces Tricky Balance Between Safety and Financial Performance](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/30/business/boeing-safety-financial-performance.html).” The story points out a conundrum for Boeing’s executives: “Should they emphasize safety or financial performance?”

The Times explained that, for years the company “put too much emphasis on increasing profits and enriching shareholders with dividends and share buybacks, and not enough on investing in engineering and safety.”

It’s worth stating the obvious: An unsafe aircraft is not an aircraft, it’s a death trap. And yet, within a capitalist framework, everything boils down to a cost-benefit analysis. If the cost of safety for companies like Boeing or Maersk outweighs the financial benefits, it’s simply not worth it for executives and shareholders. While the Alaska Airlines flight thankfully did not result in any deaths this time, hundreds of people on board 737s in [2018 and 2019](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/28/business/boeing-quality-problems-speed.html?ugrp=u&unlocked_article_code=1.gU0.hh58.xUARgkJgmVNE&smid=url-share) were not so lucky. Workers at Boeing factories in Washington and South Carolina where aircraft are assembled are required to work at breakneck speed and compromise on safety in the interest of churning out planes as fast as possible.

Who pays the price for such corporate hubris? Vulnerable workers and the public. In the case of the Baltimore bridge accident, all [22 workers](https://thewire.in/world/baltimore-bridge-collapse-dali-ship-crew-all-indians) on board the Dali were of Indian origin and their quick thinking in notifying authorities that the ship lost power helped ensure that casualties were minimized. As of this writing, they [remain trapped](https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/community/transportation/seafarers-dali-key-bridge-port-of-baltimore-ORVUH4CREFFG7AMUQ7VPETNHN4/) on board the ship with one worker having been [treated](https://apnews.com/article/baltimore-bridge-collapse-cargo-ship-dali-09aeffc6fa81f3069d4ba226def90555) at a hospital for minor injuries.

Meanwhile, the six people who are presumed dead and two who were rescued from the frigid waters were all immigrant workers from [Mexico and Central America](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/28/us/bridge-collapse-victims-baltimore.html), working on the bridge as part of a construction crew.

These are the same sort of people who suffer racist attacks and ridicule from white supremacist forces in the U.S. A right-wing outlet posted a [virulently racist cartoon](https://www.livemint.com/news/trends/baltimore-bridge-collapse-dali-indian-crew-foxford-comic-racist-cartoon-cargo-ship-us-joe-biden-wes-moore-11711640989753.html) of the Dali’s crew on social media. And only weeks earlier, Georgia’s unhinged ultraconservative Congressional representative [Marjorie Taylor Greene](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/07/us/politics/laken-riley-sotu-biden-marjorie-taylor-greene.html) heckled President Joe Biden during his State of the Union address about a white woman who “was killed by an illegal,” in an attempt to whip up anti-immigrant frenzy.

Greene appeared utterly unconcerned about the fact that construction workers in the U.S. hail [disproportionately](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/baltimore-bridge-collapse-growing-latino-labor-force-hispanics-rcna145201) from Latin American immigrant communities and many die from work-related injuries. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cfoi.nr0.htm), in 2022, “Foreign-born Hispanic or Latino workers accounted for 63.5 percent (792) of total Hispanic or Latino worker fatalities (1,248).”

Taxpayers also pay the price for corporate profiteering at the expense of safety. The U.S. [Army Corps of Engineers](https://www.bbc.com/news/68691201) is apparently footing the bill for the massive cleanup operation from the Baltimore bridge accident. And, President Biden [announced](https://www.aol.com/news/federal-government-braces-long-expensive-182406408.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAADFiFqxHLXwIMZr_B49ObAO3KnMe1Kqt9YFqK_wFcmjS_kJGHa-5ROhqkB4HA9bamzM2R3cz9OXYPwCACM4MPwAh9I41GWYluuFZ7l22Z3vcYa-RW_93sZn4BDOoV55bzmPOZ7nwYn0qfJImr7m_V9TEgsHQCs0plII6xXURt6Hc) that the federal government would “pay the entire cost of reconstructing that bridge.” Meanwhile, [Grace Ocean Private](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/28/business/who-ends-upholdingthebagfor-the-baltimore-bridge-collapse/index.html), the Singapore-based company that owns the Dali, is expected to invoke a centuries-old maritime law to limit its liability—the same law that the owners of the RMS Titanic used to limit theirs.

In the case of Boeing, the state of Washington in 2013 gave the company the [largest ever tax break](https://www.latimes.com/business/hiltzik/la-fi-hiltzik-boeing-washington-20170503-story.html) in the state’s history in exchange for housing its factory and spurring the creation of jobs. The cost to taxpayers was nearly $9 billion. And, because Washington’s governor failed to make job retention a condition for the massive tax break, Boeing then had it both ways when it cut its labor costs by slashing about 15 percent of its workforce in the state a few years later. Washington eventually [eliminated the tax break](https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/aerospace-incentives-cut-boeings-wa-taxes-last-year-by-86-million/) but Boeing still reaps tens of millions of dollars in other state-level incentives tied to aerospace manufacturing.

It’s critically important to contextualize accidents that are the result of corporations putting profits over safety and people. These incidents are not isolated or unpredictable. They are the cost of doing business—a cost that the rest of us pay for in money and lives.