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DISCUSSION PAPER
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Unsafe Work, Unsafe Roads: Labor, Road Safety and Regulation in Philippine Bus Transport

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Introduction

Driver Fatigue as a Public Safety Issue

On May 1, 2025, a provincial bus collided with multiple vehicles along the Subic-Clark-Tarlac Expressway (SCTEX), killing ten people, including four children. The driver, who was neither intoxicated nor impaired by substances, reported that he had fallen asleep behind the wheel (Ferreras 2025). This tragedy reflects a broader pattern of fatal incidents in Philippine long-haul passenger transport, where systemic labor exploitation comprises both occupational and public safety. This aligns with global findings showing that psychosocial work factors—such as job stress, long hours, and lack of control—contribute significantly to traffic accidents among transport workers in low- and middle-income countries (Amoadu, Ansah and Sarfo 2023).

The occupational safety and health of bus drivers in the Philippines is shaped by structural precarity, marked by extended working hours, insufficient pay, and limited access to health protections or consistent regulatory enforcement (Santos and Lu 2016). These issues are not isolated lapses but indicative of enduring shortcomings in the country's public transportation framework.

Within a neoliberal system, the labor of bus drivers is subjected to pressures that prioritize output over wellbeing. Contractual arrangements often transfer operational risks to workers, heightening their exposure to exhaustion, stress, and traffic-related hazards (IBON Foundation 2023).

This paper examines the connection between labor conditions and road safety. It argues that ensuring decent work standards is not just ethically sound but functionally necessary for creating a sustainable and safe transport system. The Philippine case highlights how comprehensive reforms—centered on fair compensation, labor rights, and enforceable regulation—must be integral to transport safety policy.

Unsafe Work Conditions in the Bus Sector

Bus drivers, whose labor facilitates the daily circulation of commodities and commuters, occupy a structurally subordinated position in a value chain that privileges capital accumulation over human welfare. This conflict between the social necessity of transportation and the private imperative of profit creates a tension that is resolved through the intensification of labor exploitation (Rizzo 2017).

This contradiction is most evident in the normalization of hazardous working conditions. The absence of living wages, benefits, or institutional protections compels drivers to extend their working time well beyond safe physiological limits. This is exemplified in the boundary system, a commission-based wage or compensation model, which dominated the public utility bus (PUB) sector for decades, requiring drivers to remit a fixed daily fee ("boundary") to operators, with earnings beyond this amount retained as take-home pay.

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This model placed drivers at significant financial risk, as low passenger turnout or high operational costs (e.g., fuel) often left them with negligible income. Consequently, drivers tend to engage in dangerous practices, such as speeding and overloading, to maximize fares, contributing to traffic congestion and high accident rates.

The absence of wage guarantees or social protections under this system underscores systemic labor exploitation. A 2012 Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) survey[2] validated these issues, linking compensation structures to unsafe driving behaviors and poor health outcomes due to extended working hours.

In the same year the survey was released, DOLE introduced Department Order (DO) No. 118-12, mandating a hybrid compensation structure comprising: (1) a fixed component guaranteeing a minimum wage aligned with regional rates, and (2) a performance-based component wherein benefits are tied to safety records (e.g accident-free driving) and operator profitability.

Completing this, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) issued Memorandum Circular (MC) No. 2012-001, requiring operators to secure a Labor Standards Compliance Certificate to retain franchises. These policies aimed to decouple earnings from passenger quotas, ensuring income stability and incentivizing safer practices.

These reforms faced legal challenges from bus operators, who argued violations of due process and contract impairment. However, the Supreme Court upheld the regulations in 2018[3], affirming the state's authority to prioritize public welfare over private contracts.

Despite Supreme Court backing, enforcement remains weak due to fragmented oversight between DOLE and LTFRB, limited labor inspection capacity, and the political clout of family-owned transport conglomerates.

How Work Conditions Endanger Drivers and Passengers

The erosion of occupational safety and health standards among bus drivers in the Philippines directly compromises road safety, producing a cascade of systemic risks for both drivers and the commuting public. These risks arise from structural labor conditions that compel unsafe practices, not simply individual decisions.

Despite attempts by the government to regulate bus drivers' pay and working hours, a 2016 study found that bus drivers in Metro Manila work beyond the normal working hours in order to receive a higher wage and more than half experience time pressure to reach their daily quotas. Surveyed drivers said they often work 9 to 16 hours a day for 2 to 4 days a week. An overwhelming majority also said their wages were on a commission basis of around 10% commission rate. While a bus usually earns PHP15,000 to 21,000 a day for a minimum of four round-trips, the drivers only earn around PHP1,000 (Santos and Lu 2016).

The same study reported that driver fatigue was one of the major health and safety problems experienced by bus drivers, followed by back pain, cough and colds, headache, sore eyes, diarrhea, arthritis, urinary tract infections, high blood pressure, and concussion. Fatigue causes drowsiness, reduced alertness, and impaired focus, all of which increase crash risk (Beaulieu, 2005). These symptoms reflect broader psychosocial risk factors, including poor work organization, lack of rest, and economic precarity, which consistently predict risky driving behavior in low- and middle-income countries (Amoadu, Ansah and Sarfo 2023)

Another research finds that the majority of bus and truck drivers in the Philippines work for prolonged hours on the road that may cause fatigue and sleepiness which are the highest risk factors to road accidents. The work schedule and employment issues of bus drivers account for unsafe road behavior, and this is part of industrial and employment relations that should be addressed (Lu 2022).

Economic pressure translates directly into physiological and psychological strain for drivers. Drivers, incentivized to maximize the number of trips within constrained timeframes, frequently forgo basic bodily needs. The absence of employer-provided welfare provisions such as medical insurance, routine health checks, or regulated shift limits further exposes drivers to cumulative occupational harm.

These material conditions systematically erode driver well-being, creating a working environment in which human error is not anomalous but structurally induced. Road accidents follow predictable patterns rooted in exploitative working conditions.

By externalizing labor costs and occupational risks, the prevailing system creates a negative feedback loop in which unsafe labor conditions generate

2 The full report of the 2012 DOLE survey is not publicly available. However, its key findings are cited in the Supreme Court decision G.R. No. 202275 (July 17, 2018).
3 Pangasinan Solid North Transit v. Department of Labor and Employment, G.R. No. 219836 (April 2018)

unsafe roads, which in turn reinforce the marginalization of drivers through legal, financial, and moral sanction. Public discourse often frames bus crashes as the result of reckless or negligent individuals, obscuring the structural incentives that compel such behavior (Brömmelstroet 2020).

This misattribution serves to depoliticize the problem and justify intensified surveillance or criminal penalties, rather than confronting the root cause: the commodification of driver labor under a system that prioritizes profit over safety (PISTON 2025). In this context, the protection of public safety is inseparable from the protection of workers; any genuine strategy to reduce traffic-related harm must therefore address the labor conditions that produce it.

How Neoliberalism Reshaped the Bus Industry

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Metro Manila's bus services were chiefly provided by government-owned corporations such as the Metropolitan Manila Transit Corporation (MMTC), created in 1974 and wholly operated by the Ministry of Transportation and Communications. These agencies held long-term exclusive franchises and managed fare levels administratively, insulating routes from private competition (Santiago 2021).

Neoliberalizing Bus Transport

In 1976, the martial law government mandated that private bus operators merge into four consortia, alongside the government-run MMTC as the fifth player. At that point, MMTC was the dominant carrier, operating nearly one-fifth of all buses in service. By 1980, these carriers had reorganized into 14 functional consortia, streamlining both regulation and internal enforcement. However, a concurrent government-led bus leasing initiative—which peaked in 1989—undermined this compact structure by reducing market concentration and introducing a flood of refurbished, imported second hand buses. The resulting liberalization gave rise to today's fragmented landscape (Domingo, Briones and Gundaya 2015).

By the 1990s, during the Ramos administration and under successive structural adjustment program (SAP) loans, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) mandated the sale or corporatization of state-owned enterprises. Conditionalities explicitly targeted the liberalization and privatization of "estate-owned assets," reduction of government expenditures, and streamlined bureaucracy (Abocejo 2014). As part of the IMF program, limits on foreign participation were eased, and domestic regulations on market entry/exit were relaxed. By the mid-1990s, domestic shipping, oil, telecommunications—and by extension, bus franchising—were opened to new competitors under a "minimum-operator" rule rather than exclusive, perpetual government franchises (Rodlauer, Loungani, Arora and Christofides, n.d.).

Liberalization and deregulation were the main ideological framework that shaped bus sector reforms. It paved the way for a Department of Transportation and Communications (DOTC)[4] order liberalizing entry and exit in the bus and domestic water transport sectors and mandating transparent fare- and rate-setting procedures (Department of Transportation and Communications 1992).

The order was based on the World Bank two-volume Urban Transport Sector Review (1983) document that analyzed Metro Manila's and other cities' transport bottlenecks which recommended regulatory reforms such as competitive franchising, route rationalization, and private-sector participation (World Bank 1983).

These reforms concentrate exclusively on curbing monopolies in both the public and private spheres, operating under the mistaken belief that the Philippine bus industry was already characterized by fully competitive, privately owned operators and robust regulation. Santiago (2021) contends that this flawed assumption overlooks the regulator's inherent weaknesses and the complex, networked nature of road transport. As a result, operators prioritize the most profitable routes and bypass less trafficked areas, leaving significant gaps in service coverage (Santiago 2021).

These bus transport liberalization and privatization reforms of the 1980s throughout the 1990s freed the industry from restrictive franchising regimes. In effect, dozens of small provincial lines merged or were acquired by larger conglomerates (Table 1), echoing the IMF's privatization agenda and the World Bank's call for economies of scale.

Ownership, Control, and Market Concentration

Today, despite having hundreds of franchise-owning operators, the PUB transport sector in the Philippines is dominated by a small number of family-owned conglomerates that exert disproportionate control over both fleet operations and terminal infrastructure. As of 2023, six major operators controlled a significant share of the country's 32,699 registered buses[5] (Table 1).

4 In 2016, the DOTC became the Department of Transportation (DOTr) when the communications functions of the agency were transferred to the newly formed Department of Information and Communication Technology (DICT) under the Republic Act No. 10844.
5 Land Transportation Office 2023 Annual Report. Retrieved from: https://lto.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Annual_Reports-2023.pdf

Owner	Main Company	Subsidiaries	Est. Fleet Size	Primary Service Areas
Yanson family	Vallacar Transit (Yanson Group of Bus Cos.)	• Rural Transit of Mindanao Inc.; • Bachelor Express Inc.; • Ceres Transport Inc. / Gold Star Bus Transit Inc.; • Southern Star Bus Transport Inc.; • Mindanao Star Bus Transport Inc.; • Sugbo Transit Inc.	4,800+ units	Visayas; Mindanao
Hernandez family	Victory Liner, Inc.	• Five Star Bus Company; • Bataan Transit; • First North Luzon Transit; • Luzon Cisco Transport; • Bicol Isarog Transport System; • German Espiritu Liner	3,000+ units	Metro Manila; Central Luzon; Pangasinan; Cordillera; Cagayan Valley; Bicol Region; Eastern Visayas
Morales family	Del Monte Land Transport Bus Co. (DLTBCo)	• (Subsidiary of Del Monte Motor Works, Inc.; no further sub-bus companies)	1,000+ units	Metro Manila; Calabarzon; Bicol; Eastern Visayas
Tengco family	Baliwag Transit, Inc.	• Golden Bee Transport and Logistics Corp.	600+ units	Metro Manila; Central Luzon; Pangasinan
Chua family	JAC Liner, Inc.	• Lucena Lines; • Metro Manila Bus Company; • Pangasinan Solid North Transit; • JAM Liner	400+ units	Metro Manila; Laguna; Quezon; Marinduque
Jose Chaves Alvarez (biggest shareholder)	Philtranco Service Enterprises, Inc.	• Amihan Bus Lines Inc.	250+ units	Bicol Region; Eastern Visayas; Caraga; Davao Region; Northern Mindanao

Table 1. Top Major Bus Operators in the Philippines by Fleet Size

Notes on sources and data:
- Due to the lack of publicly available data, fleet sizes and service areas are drawn from each company's Wikipedia page, website, and other various sources.
- Subsidiary listings reflect the main bus-brand affiliates under each family conglomerate.
- All figures are approximate and rounded; "+" denotes that the group operates at least that many units as of early 2025.

The top major bus operations in the country account for roughly 30% of the total registered buses in the country (Land Transportation Office 2023). The Yanson family (Vallacar Transit) alone commands more than 4,800 units, dwarfing most competitors on the Visayas-Mindanao routes.

Meanwhile, the Hernandez family (Victory Liner, Five Star, etc.) collectively deploy nearly 3,000 buses across North and Central Luzon, creating a regional dominance.

These major operators maintain proprietary access to, or de facto control of, key provincial bus terminals in Metro Manila such as Cubao and Pasay. For example, DLTBCo (Morales family), Peñafrancia Bus, Legaspi St. Jude (both subsidiaries of Bicol Isarog under Victory Liner of the Hernandez family), and Pangasinan Solid North (subsidiary of JAC Liner of the Chua family) occupy several of Cubao's six principal terminals.

Similarly, despite the establishment of the Parañaque Integrated Terminal Exchange (PITX) in 2018, many provincial lines continue to operate their own Pasay terminals under grandfathered LTFRB exemptions (Tupas 2018), arguably to retain direct control over passenger flows and ancillary revenues.

Furthermore, the Hernandez-controlled Victory Liner has leveraged its terminal network to launch Drop&Go Cargo Padala, a next-day, terminal-to-terminal freight service covering the entire Luzon corridor. By integrating passenger and cargo operations, Victory Liner maximizes utilization of idle bus space and terminal capacity, capturing additional revenue streams.

The consolidation of ownership in the PUB sector is reinforced by entrenched political networks. Major transport conglomerates maintain ties to local and national elites, enabling them to influence policy decisions and regulatory enforcement. These connections manifest through campaign financing, appointments to legislative committees, and control over terminal infrastructure critical to route operations.

For instance, Philtranco's principal shareholder, Jose Chaves Alvarez, has held multiple elected positions[6] while maintaining broad business interests in logging, transport, and real estate. Similarly, members of the Yanson family have been linked to regional political blocs in Negros[7], while the owner of JAC Liner, Jaime A. Chua, have made sizable electoral donations[8] (Bilyonaryo 2024; Ferriols 2000; Gonzales 2019; Lingao, Corrales and Dela Cruz 2013; Sunstar 2022). Although these connections are often downplayed publicly, they functionally shield dominant firms from accountability and foster regulatory capture.

How Market Power Weakens Labor Protections

This concentration of ownership facilitates the downward pressure on wages and working conditions. By controlling both the supply of driving jobs and the infrastructure needed to operate routes, conglomerates can enforce strict quotas, delay vehicle maintenance, and minimize rest allowances without competitive or regulatory constraint. These cost-cutting practices intensify driver fatigue, degrade vehicle reliability, and increase the probability of mechanical failures and traffic incidents.

Furthermore, the political leverage of these conglomerates undermines the implementation of labor protections and safety reforms. Regulatory capture, limited labor inspection capacity, and fragmented institutional mandates between the DOLE and the LTFRB allow operators to resist compliance with wage mandates and safety standards, despite Supreme Court affirmation of state regulatory authority.

In this context, market concentration enabled by decades of neoliberal policies is a structural barrier to reform. It enables the reproduction of exploitative labor practices while insulating firms from regulatory consequence, perpetuating the conditions that produce unsafe roads and driver precarity.

Reclaiming Transport as a Public Good

Addressing the structural roots of road traffic risk requires policy frameworks that target the economic drivers of unsafe labor practices. Evidence from the United States, Australia, and South Korea shows that improved driver compensation correlates with measurable reductions in crash incidence. According to a study, a 1% increase in driver pay has been found to reduce crashes by 1 to 3%, demonstrating the causal link between fair remuneration and road safety outcomes (Belzer, Rodriguez and Sedo 2022).

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has operationalized these findings through a "Safe Rates" system—a legal framework mandating minimum standards for pay and working conditions in the road transport sector. Under this model, companies across the transport supply chain are held legally accountable for ensuring that drivers are compensated fairly and are not subjected to scheduling pressures that compromise safety (International Transport Workers' Federation 2023). A scoping review of low- and middle-income countries by Amoadu, Ansah and Sarfu (2023) emphasizes the need for systemic reforms that address psychosocial and organizational contributors to traffic risk, supporting the case for a legally mandated, comprehensive framework like Safe Rates.

6 Serving as Palawan Governor (2013–2022) and Representative of Palawan's 2nd District since 2022, Jose Chaves Alvarez has controlled Philtranco since acquiring 95% of the company from its former owners led by the Hernandez family of Victory Liner, Inc. and Five Star Bus Company in 1999. He also led Partido Demokratiko Pilipino (PDP), the political party of former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, before resigning from the party in 2024 due to personal reasons

7 Some members of the Yanson family have been reported to have alliances with a "broad pro-Duterte bloc in Negros," including connections to prominent political figures such as Clint Aranas, the former GSIS boss. Despite indications of political connections, the Yanson matriarch, Olivia Yanson, has publicly maintained that Vallacar Transit Inc. remains apolitical.

8 In 2013, Jaime A. Chua, owner of JAC Liner, Inc., donated PHP7.5 million to the senatorial campaign of Juan Edgardo "Sonny" Angara and another PHP2.5 million to Angara's political party, Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino. Chua said the donation was made in his personal capacity as a close friend of a relative of Angara and had nothing to do with his company, JAC Liner.

A bill filed in the 18th Congress attempted to tackle a similar reform. House Bill 6509, filed in 2020 by Bayan Muna Partylist, sought to mandate a fixed monthly wage, reinforcing job security, empowering collective action, and establishing clear penalties. It aims to professionalize the PUB sector—enhancing road safety, stabilizing workers' livelihoods, and improving the quality of public transport service nationwide (Zarate, Gaite, and Cullamat 2020).

Addressing the structural roots of road safety in the Philippines requires policy frameworks that target the economic drivers of unsafe labor practices. At the core of these reforms must be the principle that mass transport and freight logistics are public service imperatives, not mere vehicles for private capital accumulation. This recognition should anchor a rights-based, state-enforced occupational safety framework.

The first step is to impose and enforce strict limits on daily driving hours and to prohibit the practice of over-driving. Drivers should no longer be forced to choose between their lives and livelihoods. Instead of commission-based compensation schemes that reward trip volume over safety, drivers must be provided stable, living wages that reflect the physiological demands of long-haul transport work. If performance incentives are to be used at all, they must be decoupled from passenger quotas and linked instead to safety adherence and service quality standards.

Second, alternate or "team driving" systems must be institutionalized for long-haul operations. Rather than stretching a single fatigued driver to unsafe limits, companies must absorb the cost of employing two competent, rested, and trained drivers per long-distance trip. While this may imply added expense, it is a safer, more equitable alternative that aligns with global best practices.

Third, the government should implement a fare-setting policy for public utility vehicles (PUVs) and other forms of mass transportation that is not driven by market forces but guided by the principle that public transport is a vital service that must be dependable, safe, and affordable for all commuters. A non-market-based fare policy treats public transport as an essential public service rather than a pure commodity, ensuring that pricing decisions prioritize reliability, safety, and affordability over profit. Such an approach recognizes the role of government in subsidizing and regulating fares to achieve social equity, environmental goals, and urban mobility objectives (IBON Foundation 2018).

Fourth, transport operators must be held legally accountable for maintaining safe labor conditions. Government agencies must regularly monitor compliance with occupational safety and health standards, deploying coordinated inspections between the DOLE and the LTFRB.

Finally, the broader framing must change: treating public transport workers as disposable inputs in a privatized system generates systemic harm. Structural reform must begin with the recognition that the well-being of drivers is inseparable from the safety of passengers and the public at large.

Conclusion

The recurring tragedies in the Philippine bus sector—most recently exemplified by the catastrophic SCTEX collision—are not isolated lapses but symptoms of a deeply flawed socio-economic order. Traffic incidents are also shaped by wage precarity, exploitative scheduling practices, and regulatory gaps that push drivers to the brink of exhaustion. In such a system, driver error is not an aberration; it is a structurally induced inevitability.

Legal reforms such as DOLE's Department Order No. 118-12 and the LTFRB's Memorandum Circular 2012-001 have laid the groundwork, but implementation remains weak due to market concentration, institutional fragmentation, and political resistance. International frameworks such as the ITF's Safe Rates model offer viable tools but domestic adaptation must go further: with mandatory living wage floors, tandem driving protocols, state-subsidized health coverage, and strict bans on over-driving.

Yet, even as we call for reform, we must also remember the human toll. The victims of road crashes deserve swift justice. Nothing in this political economic analysis diminishes the need for accountability, legal recourse, and collective grief. But justice should not stop at punishment. It must also mean changing the systemic conditions that lead to such tragedies in the first place.

Drivers are not the enemies of road safety—they are among its most vulnerable victims. To break the cycle of preventable death and systemic neglect, the transport sector must be rebuilt from the ground up: as a dignified profession, a well-regulated nationalized public service, and a site of shared social responsibility. •

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