Two die following Chicago train derailment

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10 July 2012

On July 4, a Union Pacific Railroad freight train derailed atop a bridge in Northbrook, Illinois, a northern suburb of Chicago. The roughly 18,000-ton train had 138 cars of coal from Wyoming's Powder River basin destined for a power plant in Wisconsin. The enormous force of the train derailing caused the bridge, over Shermer Road, to collapse. The train crew was unharmed, as the derailment happened towards the middle of the train.

Union Pacific immediately began to clean up the wreckage in order to reopen the route as soon as possible. Seventeen hours into the cleanup, on July 5, a car bumper was discovered beneath the chaos of steel and coal. As the barely recognizable wreckage of the car was uncovered, investigators found two passengers had perished inside.

Zorine Lindner, 70, and Burton Lindner, 69, married for nearly 47 years, were on an afternoon drive from their nearby home. Zorine was a retired school guidance counselor, while Burton ran a general practice personal injury law firm in Chicago with their son, Robert.

After discovery of the Lindners, work apparently continued unabated to clear wreckage from the site and begin construction of a rock fill in place of the bridge. On Friday, July 6, attorneys for the Lindners obtained a court order from a Cook County judge to halt work on the cleanup in order to inspect the scene and gather potential evidence.

The order was effectively meaningless, as Union Pacific, in a remarkable 48 hours, already had trains operating on temporary trackage over a gravel fill. UP spokesman Tom Lange said materials that could be considered evidence, such as the damaged track, had been preserved—a questionable claim, given that the scene of the accident had been entirely changed.

On the day of the accident, the Chicago region faced record highs of over 100 degrees. Both UP and the attorneys contend that there was likely a heat kink on the trackage. Welded steel rail comes in continuous quarter mile lengths, and in extreme weather conditions the expansion of the steel can result in sections of the rail breaking lose from fasteners that keep it in gauge. On July 4, UP had reduced the allowed speed of freight trains in the area from 50 to 40 mph, and it reports that the coal train was going 37 mph at the time of the accident. Under the heat advisory, tracks were inspected twice a day.

Whether these statements and conditions were properly investigated during the cleanup process is unclear. The National Safety Transportation Board is responsible for accident investigations, particularly involving injuries and fatalities. As of yet the NTSB has released no official comment on the accident. Given the speed of cleanup and rebuilding, it appears that only Union Pacific was in a position to determine the circumstances of the derailment.

Business pressures no doubt lay behind Union Pacific’s extremely rapid service restoration. Because of decades of rationalization in the railroad industry, all nearby detour options were abandoned long ago. Coal,

steel, chemicals, agricultural and automotive products would have faced lengthy re-routes. Additionally, another railroad, Canadian Pacific, uses the same section of track to connect Chicago operations to trackage in the upper Midwest and Canada.

Currently Union Pacific, the largest railroad in America, is celebrating its 150th anniversary, with promotional trains touring the western half of the country describing its history as the first transcontinental railroad. The deaths of the Lindners from the bridge collapse has no mention in their news releases, nor do the deaths of three employees on June 24 in a head-on collision between two freight trains.

Brain L. Stone, 50, of Dalhart, Texas, a conductor, and engineers Dan Hall and John Hall were killed 300 miles northwest of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, when a train of shipping containers from California to Chicago crashed into a train carrying over a mile of automobiles. Both trains were moving near the maximum allowed speeds. The resulting collision created a diesel-fueled fire that investigators say made survival impossible. A fourth crewmember, conductor Jaun Zurita, was able to jump his train before the accident with only minor injuries.

One train was supposed to take a parallel “siding” track to stop and wait for the other train, but instead both trains were moving on the same track towards each other. Preliminary reports indicate that signal systems were operating, possibly pointing to human error, but full investigation by the National Safety Transportation Board will take roughly a year.

The collision occurred in the flat, straight trackage of the Great Plains in late morning. In such collisions, it has been tragically common for a crewmember to fall asleep. Rail workers in the United States regularly work 12-hour shifts and extended workweeks. They have a notoriously rigorous schedule; at the end of a run they can have as little as eight hours before being called back to work, including transit time to and from a hotel. Family and social life is nearly impossible, as railroads demand near total availability for work.

Freight railroading, always among the more dangerous occupations, has seen a string of deadly accidents lately. Among conductors, Robert J. Glasgow, 38, was killed on May 28 in Kenmare, North Dakota after being crushed between two railcars in the middle of the night. Michal M. Shoemaker, 55, was killed in a switching accident in Gary, Indiana on January 30.

Another major railroad, Norfolk Southern, has recently been found to intimidate employees who report injuries. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has ordered the railroad to pay $800,000 in penalties for firing a laborer in Greenville, South Carolina, an engineer in Louisville, Kentucky, and a conductor in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for reporting work-related injuries. The diverse locations of the intimidation imply that Norfolk Southern, a continuous winner of the industry Harriman Safety Award, has a systematic policy of keeping reported injuries low through such abusive actions.