

Death toll rises in Quebec train derailment and explosion

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A rail accident and explosion in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec is proving to be one of the deadliest railway derailments in Canada in decades. Five people are confirmed dead, and officials warn the death toll is likely to rise much higher.

According to authorities, 40 people remain unaccounted for. Due to the intensity of the fire that was triggered by the derailment and subsequent explosions, the remains of the dead may prove very difficult to identify.

Residents are in shock, awaiting word on the whereabouts of family members and friends. At the height of the fire as many as 2,000 of the 6,000 residents of Lac-Mégantic, a town located in the Eastern Townships near the border with Maine, were told to evacuate their homes.

A 72-car train of crude oil, operated by Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway (MMA), was stopped Friday night 6.8 miles (11 km) away from Lac-Mégantic in Nantes, Quebec, where it was to switch crews. For reasons that are pending investigation the train began to move after the crew left. It then rolled downhill to Lac-Mégantic, where it derailed at excess speed on a curve in the center of town.

A series of massive explosions followed involving several of the railcars of crude oil. The explosions that resulted from the derailment in Lac-Mégantic have destroyed thirty buildings and homes, including the town's library, a grocery store, and a restaurant, the Musi-Café. Pictures show a scene similar to a warzone, with charred trees and only chimneys where buildings used to stand.

Hundreds fled the intense heat and towering flames of the explosions, but at least 40 people remain missing. Some of the missing were patrons and employees of the Musi-Café, which was very close to the derailment and

busy with nightlife at the time of the first explosion, which occurred around 1:15 a.m. Saturday.

One hundred and fifty firefighters were called in to respond Saturday, coming from as far away as Maine. They only managed to extinguish the fire Sunday evening.

The derailment may have significant environmental impact. In addition to air quality concerns from the burning oil that prompted evacuations, an undetermined amount of crude oil has spilled into the Chaudiere River and begun to travel downriver to other towns.

A team of investigators and MMA personnel were on site over the weekend to probe the reasons for the runaway train. According to a press release issued by MMA management on Saturday, the train's engineer had "tied down" the train at Nantes, which requires applying brakes on both the locomotive and several of the railcars.

Before the crew left, one of the five locomotives on the train caught fire, prompting the local fire department to respond and extinguish the fire. MMA maintains that the train's brakes and safety system were functional and did not impact further events.

On Sunday evening, MMA provided an update that did not mention this first fire, but stated that the locomotive of the train may have only been shut down after the engineer left, "which may have resulted in the release of air brakes on the locomotive that was holding the train in place."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper held a press release in Lac-Mégantic on Sunday afternoon after a brief visit to the disaster-site. He said that "it is hard to explain what happened here," but promised steps would be taken to "make sure this can't happen again."

In reality, the Harper government has a record of defending aggressive cuts to personnel, maintenance,

and service in the railway industry, while supporting the rapid expansion of the shipment of oil by rail—actions that can only lead to further such tragedies. In May 2012 Harper’s Conservative government passed back-to-work legislation ending an eight-day strike by workers of Canadian Pacific Railway (CP).

CP Rail workers were striking against the company’s plans to drastically restructure the railroad to boost shareholder profits. With the strike defeated, CP has proceeded to lay off 3,000 of its 19,500 personnel, and CEO Hunter Harrison has said the layoffs might ultimately rise to 6,000, or 30 percent of the workforce. CP workers now have longer hours at more irregular times, and their pensions have been cut. CP has combined trains to run them longer and save on crews, closed down railroad yards, and avoided significant investment towards upgrading its trackage.

Railroads in Canada are largely self-regulated, carrying out their own inspections of infrastructure. Profitability pressures meanwhile cause the railways to press for “lean” operations with reduced staffing and to skimp on the upkeep of physical infrastructure.

MMA is an example of this situation. It operates over 500 miles of railroad in Maine, Vermont, Quebec and New Brunswick that were sold by larger railroads (like CP) when the lumber, paper, and other local industries began to decline. MMA has sold some of its own trackage to the state of Maine, using the threat of abandonment to get the state’s investment in maintenance while retaining the right to operate over it. MMA owner Ed Burkhardt has pushed for one-man remote control operations to reduce labor costs by making engineers control trains while doing work on the ground.

Over the past decade several small derailments at low speed on poor trackage have caused chemical leaks. According to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, since 2000 MMA trains have spilled hazardous chemicals seven times.

The transport of crude oil is part of a new booming business for MMA and other railroads in the US and Canada, since rail is the most cost-effective and flexible option for getting vastly expanded crude production from fracking to oil refineries. While the exact reasons for the accident in Lac-Mégantic are unclear, rising hazardous material transport combined with market pressure to cut labor and infrastructure costs pose the

risk of further such catastrophes.



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