

Rail CEO blames firefighters for Quebec oil train disaster

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Quebec Provincial Police announced yesterday afternoon that the remains of fifteen people have now been recovered from the multi-block “red-zone” in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec that was destroyed by last Saturday’s train derailment, explosion, and fire. The true death toll, however, is almost certainly four dozen or more, since 35 people remain missing.

The victims that have been found are so severely burned officials are asking family members for DNA evidence to help establish their identities. Finding and identifying the remains of the dead is expected to be a painstaking, months-long process. Such was the intensity of the inferno triggered by the derailment, authorities warn they may never find identifiable remains of some of the missing.

Yesterday, the majority of the 2,000 Lac-Mégantic residents ordered evacuated last Saturday were allowed to return home. But 800 people, or close to one-sixth of the 6,000 people who call this Eastern Townships’ town their home, are still having to bunk-up with friends or relatives in makeshift shelters.

The Lac-Mégantic derailment is in all likelihood Canada’s deadliest train disaster in more than a century. In 1942, 39 people were killed when two trains collided in Alimonte, Ontario. In the worst U.S. train disaster in recent decades, a Miami-bound Amtrak train derailed while crossing a bridge in Alabama in 1993, killing 47.

While the investigation into the causes of the Lac-Mégantic tragedy is still in its early stages, the information that has come to light suggests that reckless and likely criminally negligent practices by the Montreal, Maine, & Atlantic railroad (MMA) were a pivotal factor.

The railroad has not put out a press release since Sunday, although new details about the events surrounding the accident are emerging every day. Instead, Ed Burkhardt—the CEO of MMA and the president of its parent company, Rail World Inc.—has used television interviews to blame a local fire department for triggering the chain of events that led to the derailment.

Significantly, Canada’s Transportation Safety Board

publicly rebutted some of Burkhardt’s key claims Tuesday morning. The Quebec Provincial Police have, for their part, launched a criminal probe into the derailment.

The train that derailed in Lac-Mégantic consisted of 72 cars of crude oil from the Bakken oil field in North Dakota. Canadian Pacific Railroad hauled it to Montreal, where it was handed over to MMA to continue on to a refinery in St. John, New Brunswick. In the process, MMA placed its own locomotives in charge.

At 11PM last Friday night, the train stopped in Nantes, Quebec for a crew change. The next crew was not immediately available, so procedure demanded that the train be safely secured in place. Trains have three braking systems: air brakes connected through the entire train and operated from the locomotive, individual brakes on each locomotive, and individual “manual” brakes on each railcar. All three are required to be applied to a train that will be unoccupied.

In the case of the MMA train, it was left on a significant railroad grade that headed downward 6.8 miles (11 km) into Lac-Mégantic, requiring extra caution to secure it. The engineer left one of the five locomotives running, which is necessary to maintain the functionality of the train’s airbrakes. After the engineer left, a local resident reported a fire on one of the locomotives and firefighters from the town of Nantes responded.

Before dousing the fire, the firefighters followed standard procedure and shut down the locomotive to prevent fuel from the fuel tank feeding the fire. CEO Burkhardt claimed Monday that the firefighters, “Went out there by themselves, shut the engine off, doused the fire” and didn’t notify the engineer. Burkhardt claims the shutoff of the engine released the airbrakes causing the train to roll towards Lac-Mégantic.

Yet in an interview with the *Globe and Mail* a member of MMA’s board of directors, Yves Bourdon, contradicted the claim that firefighters acted without contacting MMA. He stated that firefighters called a MMA dispatcher and alerted him of the fire when it broke out, and the dispatcher got a track-repair worker to the scene.

The track-worker was not qualified to operate locomotives, but updated the dispatcher and left the scene. Nantes Fire Chief Patrick Lambert told the media, “The people from MMA told us, ‘That’s great—the train is secure, there’s no more fire, there’s nothing anymore, there’s no more danger,’ upon which the firefighters left.

At a press briefing yesterday morning, a spokesman for Canada’s Transportation Safety Board corroborated much of Fire Chief Lambert’s account, asserting that contrary to the claims of MMA CEO Burkhardt, a company employee was present when firefighters doused the locomotive fire.

Shortly after that fire was put out and everyone had left the scene, the train began to roll and within 20 minutes it derailed, while traveling in excess of 60 mph, ending in a massive pileup in the center of Lac-Mégantic, causing explosions that left only rubble for a several block radius.

Only four or five of the 72 tanker cars actually caught fire, indicating the potential for a much larger and even more horrific catastrophe.

In its statements, MMA has failed to state clearly that it was using a one-person crew to operate the oil train, although its explanations implicitly point to that. Across the US and Canada the standard is a two-person crew, consisting of an engineer that operates the train from the cab of the locomotive and a conductor that persons on-the-ground work equipment.

As head of Rail World Inc.—a “railway management, consulting and investment corporation specializing in privatizations and restructurings”—Burkhardt has pioneered one-man “crews.” Such operations call for the engineer to do on-the-ground work like switching out railcars, while using a remote-control pack to operate the engine.

Railway workers and others have long claimed that the “one-man crews” deliver corporations huge cost savings at the expense of worker fatigue and public safety.

Investigation will show to what extent relying on a single crew member at the end of a long-shift to park a loaded train on a grade late at night imperiled public safety. To have properly secured the train, the engineer would have had to walk to several, if not dozens, of individual cars and apply a hand-brake on each one.

The engineer of the MMA train is reportedly devastated over the event. The *Toronto Star* writes that, “like many others, he accused Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway of not keeping its infrastructure up to date and for not caring about its employees.”

“They haven’t even called us since the accident,” said a colleague.

Other employees have noted that MMA track in places is increasingly substandard. Prior to last Saturday’s tragedy, Lac-Mégantic town officials and residents had also raised

concerns about the state of MMA’s infrastructure.

Yet the train’s cargo of crude oil is a booming business for U.S. and Canadian railroads. The sharp rise in oil production in the Western Canadian provinces and the Bakken region of North Dakota has not been matched with pipelines to ship it. This is partly because of environmental concerns, but also because shippers are able to increase their options for routing with railroads and don’t risk the long-term investment of a pipeline on deposits exploited through fracking, which have a much shorter lifespan.

Shipments of crude by rail in the U.S. have skyrocketed from 9,500 carloads in 2008 to 233,811 carloads in 2012. Each railcar carries roughly 740 barrels. In Canada, both major railways, Canadian National and Canadian Pacific, have seen similar exponential growth, with 16.6 million barrels of Canada crude shipped by rail in 2012. This is estimated to grow to as much as 110 million barrels in 2014.

A notoriously unsafe tank car, the DOT-111, carries much of this traffic—including the MMA train that derailed last Saturday. The U.S. National Safety Transportation board describes the DOT-111 as “inadequate to resist the shock of a derailment,” because it is easily punctured on the ends and sides. The DOT-111 is also used to carry ethanol and has been implicated in several deadly explosions and fires in the U.S. over the last decade. The Canadian government requires that when companies buy new tanker cars they are of a newer, higher standard, but with a service life of 40-50 years, the railroads and transporters plan to use DOT-111s to carry inflammable commodities for decades to come.

With the profit interests of railroads, and energy and finance companies large and small at stake, there is no doubt that fierce opposition will emerge to any effort to regulate and otherwise improve safety in this booming business.



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