

London, Ontario train car fire highlights safety concerns for rail workers in contract talks with CPKC, CN

Niles Niemuth
24 April 2024

The transit of a freight train hauling flaming rail cars through London, Ontario, Sunday night put railroaders, residents, and firefighters in serious danger. Amid ongoing contract talks between Teamsters Canada Rail Conference (TCRC), and Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC) and Canadian National Railway (CN), the incident exposes yet again the terrible safety conditions on Canada's railways. Over 9,300 workers at both companies across Canada could strike or face a lockout as soon as May 22 if they approve a walkout in a vote concluding on May 1.

Videos taken by residents that went viral on social media show the train passing through residential areas with five rail cars filled with wood railway ties on fire. The blaze produced billowing smoke as the train came to a stop between an office building and a residential tower. Wood railroad ties, which are used to hold steel rails, are preserved with creosote, which is highly toxic when burned.

While no one was injured in the incident, it is likely firefighters, railroaders and residents were exposed to the carcinogenic smoke and soot. It took a crew of London firefighters around an hour-and-a-half to put out the flames.

The train picked up the load of railway ties from around Strathroy, about 40 kilometers west of London. Many questions remain unanswered as of this writing, including how the fire started, how long the train was on fire before it was finally stopped and why it was stopped in a residential area when it was just a few blocks from a railyard.

CPKC management issued a brief two-sentence response to the incident, which shocked people around the world, telling CBC News, "The incident remains

under investigation. We thank the London first responders for their effective response to the fire last night."

The fire is currently the subject of an information gathering by the Transportation Safety Board, which has a long record of colluding with railway management and the Teamsters union bureaucracy to downplay and whitewash accidents, worker injuries and deaths.

Ian Naish, a rail safety consultant and former chief of policy, regulations and standards for Transport Canada's Railway Safety Directorate, told the *London Free Press* that it is not guaranteed that there will be a full TSB investigation of the fire. "They'll investigate ones they think they can learn something from and apply those lessons to other events to minimize risk," Naish said. Any report by the TSB on the incident will not be published for many months.

According to an assessment by the *Free Press*, there were 46 fires or explosions on board trains investigated by the TSB in 2022. Such incidents have been on the rise over the last decade, with just ten train fires under investigation in 2013. The most common accidents on the rails are derailments, impacts at grade crossings and incidents involving trespassers.

In May 2013, an unattended Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway train carrying crude oil rolled down a grade into the town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, where it derailed and exploded, killing 47 people and destroying the town centre. Three MMA workers who were criminally charged in the disaster were acquitted at trial in 2018. Four members of top management responsible for the policies which lead to the disaster pleaded guilty in 2018 to non-criminal federal charges and paid a

paltry \$50,000 fine.

The derailment of a Canadian Pacific (CP) train on the border of British Columbia and Alberta in February, 2019 killed three workers: conductor Dylan Paradis, locomotive engineer Andrew Dockrell, and conductor trainee Daniel Waldenberger-Bulmer. After a three year investigation, the TSB left it up to CP, now CPKC, to implement new safety guidelines to prevent future disasters.

The train fire in London also recalls the derailment last year in East Palestine, Ohio, where officials decided to release a massive amount of toxins into the city and surrounding area. The “controlled burn” sent a massive plume of thick black smoke into the air. The railroad in that case, Norfolk Southern, has avoided any criminal charges or admission of wrongdoing.

According to the TSB, out of 913 rail accidents in 2023 there were 67 fatalities, two more than the previous year. The majority of deaths came among those who were deemed to be “trespassing” on railroad property. Six of these accidents resulted in the release of hazardous goods into the environment.

In addition to pay and benefits, safety, including the issue of combatting worker fatigue, is a key concern for rail workers in the ongoing talks with CPKC and CN. “CN and CPKC aim to eliminate all safety-critical rest provisions from our collective agreements. These provisions are necessary to combat crew fatigue and ensure public safety,” Teamsters Canada president Francois Laporte noted in a bargaining update issued in February. The collective agreements for workers at both companies expired on December 31, 2023. Talks have been mediated by federal conciliators since March 1.

While the Teamsters bureaucracy postures over the question of safety, they have been complicit in enforcing the conditions demanded by management, which have led to needless accidents, injuries and deaths. The Teamsters apparatus for decades has worked to ram through sellout contracts, degrading working conditions, de-manning trains, and keeping trains running at the cost of workers’ health and lives.

The fight for safety on Canada’s railways requires that workers take matters into their own hands through the building of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the Teamsters bureaucracy. These committees should advance a series of non-negotiable demands, including

worker oversight over all workplace safety issues. By asserting workers’ power from the shop floor, they would create the conditions for rail workers to combat the dictatorship of management that is enforced by the Teamsters apparatus.

During the last round of bargaining in 2022, rail workers at CP took a major step forward in this struggle by establishing the CP Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The CPWRFC played a major role in bringing to light the extremely dangerous working conditions faced by railroaders, exposed the complicity of the Teamsters bureaucracy, and denounced the Trudeau Liberal government for its unstinting support for management’s demands for further concessions. Workers at CPKC and CN should build on this record of struggle by establishing rank-and-file committees to seize control of the contract fight from the Teamsters, and make it the spearhead of a broader movement drawing in all workers to fight deteriorating workplace safety, and attacks on wages and job security.

Fill out the form below to take up the struggle to build a rank-and-file committee at CPKC and CN.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact