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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (PAI) - Rail workers scored a big safety win in California on August 21 as state lawmakers gave final approval to a bill mandating two-person crews on all freight trains.

The measure, pushed by the Teamsters and their California affiliates, the Rail Division of **SMART** - the former United

Transportation Union - and the **state labor federation**, now goes to Gov. Jerry Brown, D-Calif., who is expected to sign it.

Rail unions nationwide have been pushing for the two-person crews while the rail carriers have been pushing for just one, an engineer. Several months ago, the head of one carrier, the Burlington Northern, advocated *crewless* freights.

The unionists told lawmakers presence of a second crew member would cut down on horrific crashes such as the one that obliterated downtown **Lac-Megantic**, Quebec, two years ago. Then, a runaway oil train crashed and exploded, killing 47 people. That train had only an engineer. There has been a string of similar U.S. accidents since, especially of oil-carrying trains. Recent oil train accidents were near Galena, Ill., Lynchburg, Va., and in West Virginia.

The proposed California statute requires trains and light engines carrying freight within the nation's largest state - home to one of every eight Americans - to be operated with "an adequate crew size," **reported Railroad Workers United**, a coalition of rank-and-file rail workers from SMART, the Teamsters and other unions.

The minimum adequate crew size, the bill says, is two. Railroads that break the law would face fines and other penalties from the state Public Utilities Commission. The commission supported the bill, SB730.

"Today's freight trains carry extremely dangerous materials, including Bakken crude oil, ethanol, anhydrous ammonia, liquefied petroleum gas, and acids that may pose significant health and safety risks to communities and our environment in the case of an accident," said sponsoring State Sen. Lois Wolk, D-Solano.

"With more than 5,000 miles of railroad track that crisscrosses the state through wilderness and urban areas, the potential for derailment or other accidents containing these materials is an ever present danger. I urge the governor to sign this bill into law, providing greater protection to communities located along rail lines in California, and to railroad workers."

"California has nearly 7,000 miles of railroad track that winds through both wilderness and urban areas, making train safety a priority issue," said California Labor Federation spokesman Steve Smith. "SB730 will help to protect railway workers, the public, and the environment from freight train derailments by ensuring trains operate with a two-person crew.

"The labor federation is proud to support this critical legislation and we're urging the governor sign it into law."

The rail workers union and Railroad Workers United have also pushed for two-person crews at the national level, but they've run into indifference, at best, in the Republican-run 114th Congress. Meanwhile, the carriers lobby federal regulators to let them have one-person crews.

Dennis Pierce, President of the **Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers** and the **Teamsters Rail Conference**, told the U.S. House Transportation Committee in June that while another safety measure - positive train control (PTC) - would also help cut down the possibility of accidents, it's no substitute for two-person crews.

"PTC can't replace the second crewmember," Pierce said then. "It doesn't provide a second set of eyes and ears trained on the road ahead or monitor the 'left' side of the train for defects like hot wheels, stuck brakes or shifted lading, or observe the 'left' side of highway-rail grade crossings for drivers who fail to stop, or separate stopped trains that block crossings to allow first responders to cross the tracks."

SMART, the Teamsters and other rail unions and workers are pushing the **Safe Freight Act (HR1763)**, mandating the two-person crews, introduced by Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, the senior Republican in the House.

SMART Transportation Division President John Previsich said, "The safest rail operation is a two-person crew operation. With several major train derailments having occurred in the last few months...our lawmakers and the general public must understand that multi-person crews are essential to ensuring the safest rail operations possible in their communities. No one would permit an airliner to fly with just one pilot, even though it can fly itself. Trains, which cannot operate themselves, should be no different."

*Photo: Police helicopter view of Lac-Mégantic, the day of the derailment. Forty-two people were confirmed dead, with five more missing and presumed dead. **Licensed under CC BY-SA 1.0 via Commons***



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