

“Crude Awakening” Holds Founding Conference in Pittsburgh, PA

On November 13-15, 2015, community activists from across North America convened a conference in Pittsburgh, PA. Its goal was to build a continent-wide network to more effectively fight unsafe oil train shipments. RWU was invited to attend, and our Steering Committee dispatched Fritz Edler (also see his report from Lac Megantic on Page 3) to take part and represent RWU at the conference. His report follows

I attended the Oil Train Response Conference in Pittsburgh, sponsored by ForestEthics and Frac Tracker, as a representative of RWU under assignment from the RWU Steering Committee. I was the only railroader present. The goal was to create the first cross-continent network coordinating opposition to the shipment of volatile oil shipments by rail. There were about 250 attendees - including a number of Canadians - and a broad representation of various organizations.

RWU had many friends in attendance at this conference. It was solely due to the hard work of RWU members in working with these folks and others in presenting the three 2015 regional safety conferences that the job of winning them over to understanding the importance of an alliance with railroad workers now has a chance. I would like to think that this important background work has now been continued at this conference. One result of the conference is now a continent wide network of activists that will coordinate and cooperate and probably meet again regularly on the oil train issue. They have hit the ground running by coordinating continent-wide phone conferences that began on December 4, 2015.

While on the balance, the conference on the whole was positive and presented an opportunity to move forward, for railroad workers, the conference did hold both pros and cons. It is clear that across the continent, there are people actively working to prevent unsafe shipments of oil by rail. Many of them are doing very good work. It is equally clear that there are many things most of them do not understand about railroads and the role that we play as railroad workers.

The Pros: Railroaders probably don't fully appreciate the danger to which the industry is currently exposing us. We're used to doing tough and dangerous things and most probably lump Bakken/Shale/Tar Sands Oil in with all that. That needs to change, and so drawing the attention to the matter is good. As was pointed out at the Conference, railroad unions spearheaded the "Right to Know" laws that are now on the books and are some of the few protections we have. Volatile oil shipments are fundamentally dangerous. Frankly, no matter how safe and professional our brothers and sisters are in operations, true safety for "bomb trains" is out of our control by railroad policy. So the nationwide *Crude Awakening Network* helps us.

Many of the activists there have either attended RWU safety conferences or have favorable impressions based on what they've heard. While our world is still very alien to them, many have already made an effort at including rail workers and including consideration of us even when they are unable to find railroader partners for their actions. ForestEthics and its partners did a model job of organizing the conference which ran smoothly and encompassed a truly huge amount of material. ForestEthics was an endorser of and participant in the three RWU Rail Safety Conferences in 2015.

The Cons: There was never one mention from the podium of workers or rail workers during the entire conference leading up to the panel I was on, a breakout on the *last* day. Every other possible stakeholder, including the carriers, were either on panels or had their concerns discussed. The overwhelming sentiment of the attendees was that oil shipments are *bad*. No distinction made. The T-shirt for the conference says only "Stop Oil Trains". I made the point to ForestEthics organizers that railroaders have been hauling regular oil by rail for probably 150 years with a safety record that is the envy of transportation. I also pointed out that it is unreasonable to demand of railroaders that they alone be singled out to subsidize a social goal (ending reliance on, and the dangers of, petroleum products). If it is the greater good for society, then the whole society needs to bear the cost both economically and socially and not expect *only* railroaders (not truckers, not pipelines, not maritime) bear that cost

for everyone. My impression was that they were somewhat embarrassed by this, but since they still fundamentally believe they aren't really engaging railroaders with their slogans, it isn't a big deal to them. We have a lot of work to do here.

There were participants, a minority, who are solely focused on "direct action" (acts of civil disobedience). It wasn't a big debate but it did come up in conversations and workshops. This has already presented a dangerous situation for RWU in the past, where some activists have proposed *direct actions* that endanger both themselves and railroaders. Many of the participants believe this issue is so important that they need to up the ante in some way. That will continue to be a problem for us until we can convince them that actions on railroad property, unless they are very carefully examined and executed, are bad ideas both in terms of safety and in terms of building the broadest possible coalition around safety.

Keynote Presentation: Marilaine Sevard from Lac Megantic gave a keynote presentation. She gave powerful presentation and in most regards it was in line with everything we knew about the organized folks in Lac Megantic, including rejection of the scapegoating of engineer Tom Harding.

RWU Info: I was able to distribute the RWU position papers on *Long & Heavy Trains, Track & Infrastructure, Single Person Crews, and Union Based vs Behavior Based Safety Programs*. I also made copies and put out an English language translation of the Nantes, Quebec town council resolution that condemned the railroad and rejected the blame-the-worker approach. I participated with the Canadians in their regional breakout with a special focus on building a conference there if possible. The Canadians were impressed by RWU's participation in the Lac Megantic October 11th event.

I presented a slide show that focused on a combination of what RWU is and does, why it is a mistake for activists to discount railroad workers, and what we can do to change that. Twenty slides, including several on the action at Lac Megantic, focusing on how *that* community understands better the role of railroaders. In particular, there was interest in the slide where I outlined what groups could do to promote the alliance between environmental activists and railroaders. Despite my unhappiness with the general lack of recognition of the place of railroad workers, the reaction to my part of the railroad industry break-out session was very well received and generated a lot of discussion.

In conclusion, it was good that RWU was represented there, good that we made a presentation, and good that a continent-wide network is coming together. Unfortunately we have a long way to go in building the broadest possible movement against unsafe train operations. After the conference, there is some evidence that our participation made some difference in the way at least *some* of the activists have changed their outlook and their public work. Time will tell, but we will soon see whether our proactive work bears fruit in building the strongest possible coalition against dangerous oil shipments by rail and for rail safety in general.