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## **Ottawa conference discusses Lac-Mégantic rail disaster**

**BY JOHN STEELE**

OTTAWA, Ontario — Who was responsible for the July 2013 Montreal, Maine and Atlantic oil train derailment and explosion that killed 47 people and destroyed downtown Lac-Mégantic — framed-up rail workers Tom Harding and Richard Labrie or the Canadian government and rail bosses? That was a central question discussed at a Dec. 8 conference of some 60 people here on “Have the Lessons of the Lac-Mégantic Rail Disaster Been Learned?”

The gathering, sponsored by the University of Ottawa law faculty, was initiated by Bruce Campbell, author of a series of articles exposing the complicity of Transport Canada, the federal transportation agency, with Montreal, Maine and Atlantic Railway in its disregard for safety in search of higher profits.

Locomotive engineer Harding and train controller Labrie, members of the United Steelworkers, along with Jean Demaitre, a low-level official with the now bankrupt and defunct MMA, are charged with 47 counts of criminal negligence. If convicted, they could face life in prison.

“How did the MMA get approval to run one-man crews from Transport Canada? Why did both Conservative and Liberal governments oppose demands for an independent public inquiry into the disaster?” Robert Bellefleur, spokesperson for Citizens and Groups Coalition for Rail Safety in Lac-Mégantic, said in the opening panel. “Why did Ottawa secretly pay \$75 million into a compensation settlement to the victims that protected the government and its ministers from any legal liability?”

Bellefleur and four other coalition members described the fight they have waged to force the federal government to build a rail bypass around the town.

Other panels discussed the need to strengthen rail safety laws and regulations.

“The railway barons are stronger than ever. They write the rules, and then apply for exemptions,” said Brian Stevens, National Railway director of Unifor, Canada’s largest private sector union, who worked for years as a locomotive brake mechanic. “Company rules prevented Harding from using a 10-second procedure to activate the automatic air brakes that would have prevented the disaster, in order to save 15 minutes of startup time the next day.”

“At least 80 percent of the Lac-Mégantic population thinks the charges against Harding and Labrie should be dropped and that MMA owners and top Transport Canada officials should be charged with criminal negligence,” this writer said in the discussion.

“Charging Harding and Labrie shows the government thinks we must all be stupid,” said Lac-Mégantic resident Claude Roy.

“The laws and justice system are biased against workers,” Communist League member Annette Kouri said. “In 2015, the government threatened back-to-work legislation to pressure 2,000 Canadian Pacific rail workers to end their strike against imposed work schedules that were causing dangerous worker fatigue conditions. A victory for Harding and Labrie will help to encourage rail workers to take control of safety conditions through their unions.”

“We can’t forget that the key stakeholders on all these questions discussed here are rail workers themselves,” said Fritz Edler, a retired Washington, D.C., engineer and member of Rail Workers United active in the defense of Harding and Labrie. “We know what the problems around rail safety are and what has to be done to fix them on the ground.”

Harding’s lawyers, Thomas Walsh and Charles Shearson, told the *Militant* they will argue for a “stay in proceedings” to permanently drop the case at a Jan. 26-27 court hearing .

After continual delays, the workers’ trial won’t begin until Sept. 11, 2017 — 40 months since they were charged.

There has been a massive backlog of criminal cases in courts across Canada, and in particular in Quebec. In July the Supreme Court ruled that under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 30 months should be the maximum in “reasonable delays” in criminal cases.

“The public should follow closely what is going on in the court,” Lac-Mégantic Citizens’ coalition activist Gilbert Carette told the *Militant*. “We should fill the courtroom for the next hearing.”

Solidarity messages for Harding and Labrie can be sent to USW Local 1976/Section locale 1976, 2360 De Lasalle, Suite 202, Montreal, QC H1V 2L1.