

RWU Special Report: Lac Megantic

RWU Special Envoy On Fact Finding and Solidarity Mission in Quebec

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RWU member Fritz Edler spent a week in Quebec in April to express our solidarity, gain insight into the developing situation, and advance RWU's efforts to defend the railroaded workers.

RWU members have been in the forefront of understanding the importance to the railroad industry of the disastrous wreck in Lac-Mégantic on July 6, 2013. That incident where 47 died has become a kind of referendum on rail safety and the purpose of the rail industry. It's been a flashpoint for opposition to rail shipments of volatile oil shipments. It has also been a critical test of who gets to decide about dangerous railroad policies and of the unions' response or lack thereof. At stake is whether railroad managers are free to implement dangerous policies and then scapegoat workers when the inevitable consequences come home to roost.

In the aftermath of that tragedy, Tom Harding (the single crew Engineer) and Richard Labrie (the Train Dispatcher) were both charged with 47 counts of *Criminal Negligence resulting in Death* and various lesser charges. If convicted, they could be imprisoned for life. In previous issues of *The Highball*, we have documented how they are being scapegoated for the policies over which they had no control and which were in fact the decisive factors in causing the wreck.

Tom Harding and Richard Labrie - members United Steelworkers Local #1976 - were scheduled for an important procedural hearing on April 4th in Lac-Mégantic, QC. Tom Walsh, attorney for Tom Harding, was speaking at the RWU Convention in Chicago immediately beforehand. I made arrangements to coordinate with him and others involved in the defense effort based on contacts made when I attended the Citizen's Coalition demonstration in Lac-Mégantic on October 11, 2015. (see *The Highball*, Winter 2016). The objective was to attend and give public support at the hearing, as well as to meet with activists and community members.

As our Convention was concluding in Chicago. Labrie had assumed a new lawyer, and as a result, the judge canceled the hearing. Since travel plans had already been made, I took advantage of the opportunity to meet with various concerned groups and individuals in Quebec. It was especially important in light of recent revelations about the rail carrier's policy against using air brakes to secure the train. Published in the *Toronto Globe & Mail* in early March, this critical information had been little known of in French speaking Quebec.

I was picked up by a key Harding/Labrie supporter in Montreal along with two students from the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM), organizers of a defense effort meeting at the university for later in the week. Together we drove to Lac-Mégantic and met with Jacques Breton, the Mayor of the nearby town of Nantes (where the runaway oil train had been secured) who had ushered through the town council a resolution condemning the MMA, which was subsequently taken up and approved by 300 other town councils in Quebec. Breton is also president of his local union of UNIFOR, a big union that includes most of the non-operating craft Canadian rail employees. He agreed to take a sample resolution in defense of Harding/Labrie that had been distributed at the RWU Convention and usher it through his local and up the union hierarchy.

The next morning, we met with the Citizen's Coalition leaders who had organized the demonstration in October, 2015. The citizens of Lac-Mégantic have endured many problems since the wreck. Fully two-thirds of the them are considered to have PTSD and other difficulties. Coalition members are disheartened and town survivors are often pitted against each other regarding everything from settlement payments to rail safety and operations. Their biggest concern is the resumption of rail operations without safety guarantees. They are in dire need of support and allies.



Engineer Tom Harding (Left) with Fritz Edler in Farnham, Quebec.

I explained the significance of the air brake revelations (which at that time had had no publication in French). We visited the local paper in town, *L'echo de Frontenac* and left a packet of RWU and *Globe & Mail* articles. The editor would later call. Powerfully taken by the materials, he arranged an interview with Tom Walsh (who is well known in Quebec) and published (as far as we know) the first French language articles exposing the air brake question in Lac-Mégantic.

The next day, we went to a big convention of the Steelworkers union and met with Mike Piché, staff officer for all the rail Steelworkers in Canada. He would take our RWU articles, translate them into French, and distribute them to local affiliates. Then on Thursday morning early, I visited with Tom Harding at his home in Farnham. After touring the local area and rail facilities there, I presented Harding with an RWU pin and a jersey from BLET #316 in Atlanta, plus a copy of the song "Casey Jones' in Lac-Mégantic", by RWU Organizer JP Wright.

That afternoon Tom Walsh and I spoke to the students at UQAM. The event was videoed by a student group as well as a filmmaker from Lac-Mégantic. Walsh explained that from a legal standpoint, at this point the issue isn't even a question of Harding's guilt or innocence, but rather a question of civil liberties, since the Crown has violated or abused almost every normal procedural protection under Canadian criminal law to date. The next morning, before flying back to Washington DC, we visited a huge CP rail yard in Montreal and leafleted the workers driving in and out with RWU commentaries on the Harding/Labrie defense. This info was very well received.

This latest trip deepened RWU's connections with those in Canada and opened up new opportunities - not only for the defense efforts - but for RWU's Canadian efforts in general.