DEARBORN, MICH.—Members of the group Railroad Workers United were enjoying a few beers after their biennial convention in Dearborn, Mich. April 23 when one of them got a text message with some terrible news: a Chicago railroad conductor, 37-year-old Melinda Carter, had just died in an accident at CSX’s large Riverdale rail yard on the south side of Chicago.

As they pieced together details, they felt sure the tragedy confirmed a key message of the progressive railroad workers group. They blame Carter’s death on remote-control locomotive (RCL) technology, now the norm for most major rail yards.

Though details are still sketchy, Carter—with 11 years in the industry—was run over by the locomotive she was conducting. RCL technology, which often means only one person is operating an entire train, is among the cost-cutting measures that the railroad workers say are putting workers and the public at extreme risk.

The RWU convention dovetailed with the biennial Labor Notes conference held this weekend. In a hotel suite there the night after Carter’s death, railroad engineer John Paul Wright strummed a song for another alleged casualty of rail yard modernization: 33-year-old Jared Boehlke, killed when he stepped between two train cars in the CSX Selkirk yard in upstate New York on Mother’s Day 2009. Boehlke was a remote control operator (RCO) and the single operator of the train.

“There is almost no regulation. This needs to change,” said Boehlke’s widow Heather. “I have a three-year-old daughter who will now never have a dad. Something has to be done.”

After Boehlke’s death, the United Transportation Union (UTU) and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) petitioned the Federal Railroad Administration to prohibit the use of remote controlled, single-operator locomotives. In November the agency ruled there was no evidence Boehlke’s RCO, single operator status caused his death.

Railroad freight is considered the most cost effective and environmentally friendly way to move cargo around the United States, and the industry is expected to grow exponentially in coming decades. Warren Buffet’s recent majority purchase of BNSF highlighted the idea that railroads are a growth industry of the future.

The RWU members are passionate about railroads. But they say the lack of government regulation and the cut-throat corporate belt-tightening are turning the industry into a death trap.

“We love our jobs but we hate going to work,” said Ron Kaminkow, an Amtrak worker based in Reno. “We love the railroad, we hate the company.”

Wright described getting no training when his Louisville, Ky., yard instituted remote-controlled operations. “They just give me this box with switches, that could kill me or someone else,” he said.
Steve Desavouret, a Chicago freight inspector with Canadian National, said freight inspectors are pressured to cover up safety violations, like wheels that have worn too thin. When inspectors like him employed by the companies raise concerns, he said, Federal Railroad Administration regulators rarely take action. He said he was fired in what he views as retaliation for airing these views.

“At best they ignore (inspectors’ concerns), at worst they conspire with the company to get rid of the guy,” said Desavouret, a former recording secretary for the ITU/ IAM union local 6608. “There are near-misses all day long, every day. People are constantly in danger.”

The railroad workers complain that their highly fragmented unions – there are 13 just in the Chicago area – do little to cooperate or advocate for reform of working conditions and safety. Hence the birth of RWU’s predecessor Railroad Operating Crafts United in 2005, with the switch to RWU in 2007. Eliminating remote-controlled locomotives and single operators are among their major goals.

During the Labor Notes conference, workers across the various nationwide sectors of logistics and goods movements strategized about uniting to fight the safety and job loss effects of automation, sub-contracting and cost-cutting. Longshoremen, truck drivers, railroad workers, warehouse workers and those in related jobs are the human infrastructure of the trade and transport network upon which the country’s whole economy depends.

Progressive labor leaders from the east and west coast longshoremen’s unions (ILA and ILWU), the Teamsters, the Chicago-based Warehouse Workers for Justice campaign and other groups talked about the challenges raised by recalcitrant unions, subcontracted temporary workforces, and grueling schedules in building such a multi-faceted labor movement. But given the directions all these industries are heading, they implied there is no choice.

“No one should have to die on the job,” said Seattle railroad worker Jen Wallis. “If someone dies on the job, we should shut this country down. We can do it.”

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Kari Lydersen, an In These Times contributing editor, is a Chicago-based reporter, author and journalism professor at Medill at Northwestern University, where she is fellowship director of the Social Justice News Nexus. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Reader and The Progressive, among other publications. Her books include Mayor 1%: Rahm Emanuel and the Rise of Chicago’s 99 Percent., Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun and Revolt on Goose Island: The Chicago Factory Takeover, and What it Says About the Economic Crisis.

More information about Kari Lydersen