RWU Special Report: Lac Megantic Citizens’ Rally Against Unsafe Trains

Fritz Edler, RWU Member, BLET #482, Retired

On October 11, 2015, RWU member Fritz Edler was dispatched to the small town of Lac Megantic, Quebec where a mass rally was planned to protest the return of what many see as unsafe train operations through the ill-fated Canadian town. Brother Edler was able to address the crowd briefly, brought greetings of solidarity from RWU, made contacts with citizens’ groups, and investigated prospects there for a future rail safety conference. His report follows ...

Nearly all North American rail workers and others who are affected by rail operations know the names of the towns ... Grantsville AL, Chatsworth CA, Spuyten Duyval NY, Frankfort Junction, PA to name a few. But one town stands out by the sheer magnitude of the death and devastation ... Lac Megantic, Quebec, Canada.

On July 6, 2013, 72 tank cars of highly volatile Bakken crude oil ran away and rolled away down a 1.2% grade into the town of Lac Megantic and the train derailed in the historic town center, destroying 100 homes and businesses and killing 47. It was the worst rail accident in Canada since 1864. Behind this accident was a series of business decisions by the U.S. based rail carrier — Montreal Maine & Atlantic (MM&A) — so egregious that it is astounding that something terrible hadn’t happened sooner. In the aftermath of the devastation, the Canadian Transportation Safety Board (TSB) found 18 distinct causes and contributing factors leading to the wreck. The vast majority of these were readily preventable failures by the MM&A and Transport Canada. And most of them had been the usual method of operation on the MM&A for years.

It was at the RWU rail safety conference held in Chicago September 19th that RWU members first learned about the Lac Megantic citizens’ plan to hold a protest rally on October 11, 2015 in an attempt to block renewed shipments of volatile oil through the town. When that action was announced, activists present immediately wanted to participate. It was out of that moment that the Lac Megantic solidarity rally in Chicago on October 12 at the Canadian Consulate was organized. In addition, RWU members present discussed the solidarity value of having RWU railroad workers present at the Lac Megantic event. Being present would afford us the opportunity to build links and to play a role in shaping the way that the role of railroad workers is portrayed.

As a result, I volunteered to represent RWU at Lac Megantic on October 11th. Lac Megantic is not easily accessible from the US. It is about 40 miles from the border of Maine but it is in rural and mountainous country and is a two and a half hour drive from Montreal. The first impression one gets upon arrival is one of an outdoor sports paradise. But that impression is soon dispelled upon arrival at the town center, devastated two years earlier in the dramatic explosion of the derailing train.

About one thousand turned out on a cold and rainy Sunday afternoon. I marched with Tom Walsh, who is Tom Harding’s attorney. Harding is the scapegoated engineer of the wrecked oil train, who, together with his dispatcher, faces 47 counts of criminal negligence resulting in death. No corporate top officer is facing charges despite the findings of the Transportation Safety Board. Everyone I spoke to expressed support for Harding and called for prosecution of those who had created the policies that led to the wreck. In addition, they were amazed and delighted that railroaders from the U.S. knew about their issues and would come north to support them. With the citizens’ organizing committee, I raised the idea of jointly sponsoring a rail safety conference with RWU in Quebec. This was well received, and the idea has since been debated, discussed and looked upon favorably.

The defense of Tom Harding is probably the most important question facing militant railroad workers today. It stands at the crux of all of the biggest issues in front of us. Our solidarity with the town of Lac Megantic and furthered relations with his local defense puts RWU in a better position going forward. If we want to prevent our brothers and sisters from being caught between the pinchers of community hostility to rail as a whole and our own shortsighted leaders and co-workers looking only for short-term work at any social cost, Tom Har-