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Lac-Mégantic Rail Bypass

Community Residents Must Have Decisive Say in the Project and Their Future

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A tense situation has arisen regarding the construction of the railway bypass that will divert trains from the downtown of the Quebec community Lac-Mégantic, where on July 6, 2013 a train carrying highly flammable oil derailed, caught fire and exploded. A safe bypass has been a demand of the region's communities since that rail tragedy which caused 47 deaths, serious injuries to many others and severe post-traumatic stress for the residents, as well as very extensive property damage.

The bypass route is now strongly contested among the population. The proposed route passes through the industrial area in Lac-Mégantic and the neighbouring communities of Frontenac and Nantes. In a referendum held in February in the municipality of Frontenac, where the turnout was about 50 per cent, 90 per cent of those who voted were against its construction.

Why this tension exists is an important question as the concern for rail safety and the social healing of the Lac-Mégantic community remains strong.

When the government announced its proposed route, the people of Nantes and Frontenac proposed alternative routes based on a variety of concerns, including the environment, which has now become a central issue. These proposals were simply turned down. Later, the government claimed to have consulted the public, but it did not retain the proposals received, nor did it discuss them publicly. Quebeckers and Canadians are familiar with such consultations where the form is abused by ignoring the submissions made and simply confirming what the company or government in question has already decided.



Canadian Pacific (CP) bought the Central Maine & Quebec Railway (CMQR) in December 2019, which had bought the bankrupt American company, Montreal, Maine & Atlantic (MMA), the owner of the rail line when the Lac-Mégantic tragedy occurred. With its purchase, CP will become the owner of the bypass.

Community residents have learned that CP intends to run trains on the new track of 200-250 cars – more than three times the number of cars on the Mégantic death train – including cars carrying hazardous materials, travelling at speeds of 40 miles (64 kilometres) per hour. It will pass through the Mégantic industrial park near factories such as Tafisa, a giant particle board manufacturing company that has already experienced a fire and large explosions because it emits a lot of highly flammable wood dust into the air.

In addition, it was presented as a *fait accompli* that the railroad right-of-way -- the strip of land reserved for rail operations -- will double in width, presumably to accommodate a second CP track. The cost of the bypass, which was estimated in 2019 at about \$130 million, will now exceed \$1 billion, entirely paid for by the federal and Quebec governments.

Many point out that the bypass, as currently defined, is no longer a rail safety and social healing project, but a government-CP project to increase CP's profits and strengthen its position amongst North America's largest rail companies. CP has just purchased the U.S. railroad Kansas City Southern, which will create a giant integrated North American rail network. Certainly, residents did not support the bypass project as a future transcontinental hazardous materials highway.



And who could blame community residents for holding such a view?

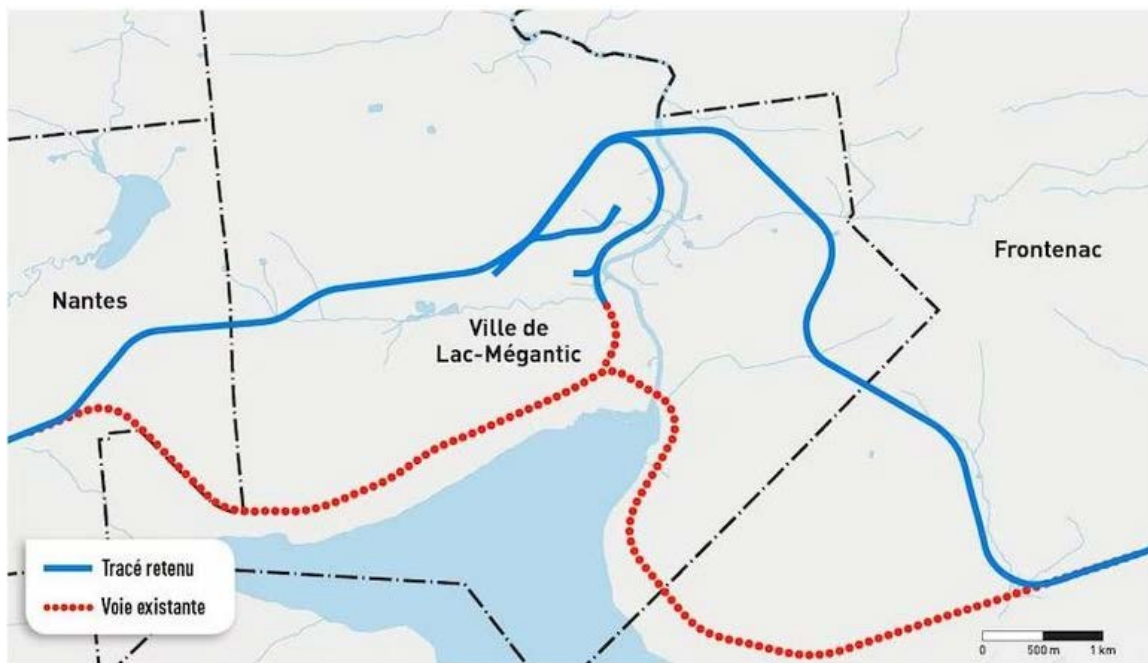
Claiming that this demonstrates community opposition to the bypass project is a diversion, denying the real concerns and demands being raised by the people, to pit them against each other and simply to impose the project.

Or the authorities will say that the bypass is now a thing of the past, that the citizens don't want it, and have only themselves to blame for the

insecurity and railroad anarchy that will continue on the old track in downtown Mégantic.

Various organizations have put forward concerns and demands that must be heard and play a decisive role in defining the bypass project.

Organizations and citizens oppose the undue division of agricultural and forestry land by the planned route, which will result in a loss of income and property value for those properties divided or enclosed by the rail line. They have proposed that working committees be formed to assess equitable compensation for all those who will suffer losses.



Le tracé retenu de la voie de contournement ferroviaire de Lac-Mégantic.
PHOTO : GOUVERNEMENT DU CANADA

On February 13, people were extremely shocked to receive the notice of intent to expropriate landowners for the construction of the track issued by the federal Minister of Public Services and Procurement at the request of the Transport Minister. Nearly 1,500 letters challenging the notice of intent to expropriate were hand-delivered to the department's Montreal office within days.

The biggest and most detailed concern was environmental. Organizations and citizens have asked the federal Minister of Environment to hold an environmental impact assessment of the bypass project.

One concern is that the digging and blasting that will have to be done may contaminate the water table affecting supplies of drinking water to Lac-Mégantic and the surrounding area.

There is also concern about the loss of vast areas of wetlands that play an important role in storing carbon and preserving biodiversity. Another concern is that clearing forest areas to construct the railroad will release hundreds of tons of carbon into the atmosphere.

The main demand of the organizations and citizens is that their voice be heard and respected, that they have a decisive role in what is adopted so that the interests of the communities are defended.

This is a modern, just and necessary demand.



Ongoing Mass Protests and Strikes in Greece Following Devastating Train Tragedy

Greek People Seething with Anger



Athens, March 12, 2023

The Greek people, especially workers and youth, are organizing relentless actions to hold the country's government and the railway company Hellenic Train accountable for their responsibility in the train disaster that left 57 dead and at least 85 injured when two trains collided on February 28.

Shortly before midnight a passenger train with about 350 passengers on board and a freight train collided at high speed, when travelling in opposite directions between Athens and Thessaloniki, Greece's two largest cities. Even though this is a double track, the two trains were travelling in opposite directions on the same track. The tragedy occurred near the town of Larissa, in the central-eastern part of Greece. Among the 57 dead were a large number of students, who were returning from an extended weekend due to a public holiday in Greece.

When people heard the Prime Minister of Greece say, the day after the disaster, that it was "mainly due to a tragic human error," pointing the finger at the Larissa stationmaster, they immediately took action to condemn these words. They are demanding the resignation of the government and an end to the anti-social offensive with its measures such as privatization and austerity, which destroys human life by making humans things instead of humans with rights that must be guaranteed, which is the first responsibility of a modern society.

Almost daily demonstrations took place. The slogans *We are the voice of the dead*, *Their profits, our deaths*, *It was a crime that was announced*, *Privatization kills* and others resounded across the country. One of the most common slogans, *Call me when you arrive*, expresses the unbearable grief for the loss of loved ones and compatriots.

On March 8, hundreds of thousands of workers from all sectors participated in a national strike in several cities of Greece, with the participation of youth and people from all walks of life, declaring forcefully that there is no way the crime is going to be covered up by the authorities. The strike was extended until March 10. The unions representing the privatized railway company involved in the tragedy said they had been reporting incidents of malfunctioning signals on the track where the tragedy occurred for weeks and no action had been taken to address the problems.



Agrinio, March 8, 2023



Rhodes, March 8, 2023

On March 12, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Athens and Thessaloniki. In the capital, demonstrators occupied Syntagma Square, near the Parliament, with banners saying *We will not forget, we will not forgive and We will be the voices of all the dead.*

Police responded to the protests with tear gas and batons, but the mobilization did not slow.

The government has promised a transparent and impartial investigation into the causes of the tragedy, while the Greek people have spoken out about the causes and are demanding an accountability that must include an end to the anti-social offensive and a human-centred solution to the crisis that is affecting Greece.

One of the demands of the people is that the charges against the Larissa stationmaster and three other railroad employees be dropped. The charges include negligent homicide, which could result in life imprisonment if they are convicted. It was revealed that the stationmaster was appointed to the position only 40 days prior to the accident, after a job with the Department of Education. Media reports are saying he was left alone at the Larissa station for four days, without anyone to supervise him, when train traffic on that line was heavy due to the long weekend.

General elections were due to be held in the spring, but they are now scheduled to be held in July because of these events.

An Anti-Social Offensive that Destroys Human Lives



Volos, March 3, 2023

When the demonstrators chant the slogan *Privatization kills* they have in mind specific events that have been happening in Greece for many, many years and still have terrible consequences for the people.

Towards the end of the 2000s, in the name of tackling Greece's public debt, the European Central Bank, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund dictated to Greece a destructive anti-social offensive made up of, among other things, multiple privatizations and austerity measures of all kinds against the workers and the people. Among the many measures, there have been drastic cuts in the minimum wage and in the wages of public sector workers, large cuts in the health budget, and cuts in public sector pension benefits. The living and working conditions of Greeks have been devastated, and public services mutilated. Unemployment has reached record levels, as has the suicide rate.

To this was added a wave of privatizations, always in the name of paying the government's debt. Greece has experienced the privatization of ports, airports, railroads, public buildings, public utilities providing water and electricity, etc. Greek workers and people have been fighting relentlessly against this squandering of public assets and anti-social austerity for the benefit of the financial oligarchy, and this struggle is clearly alive in the current mass actions for accountability in the face of the railway disaster.



Tens of thousands of workers and students flood all the streets in the centre of Athens March 16, 2023, marching to the Hellenic Train offices.

The private railway company Hellenic Train, which runs most of Greece's rail services, including the Athens-Thessaloniki line, and operates both freight and passenger trains, was created through privatization by the Greek state. In 2017, the state-owned TrainOSE was sold to the Italian state-owned railway company Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane. It changed its name to Hellenic Train in 2022.

Until 2008, TrainOSE belonged to the Hellenic Railways Organization (OSE), the state institution responsible for managing the railway infrastructure of the entire country. TrainOSE was responsible for all operational and management activities of the passenger and freight railway sector. In 2008, it became a public company independent of OSE. This was a prelude to its privatization. It was sold to the Italian company for 45 million euros, which was considered a paltry sum. The Greek state has subsidized Hellenic Train. In 2022, for example, it has committed to subsidizing Hellenic Train with 50 million euros per year for 10 years, under the hoax of helping it to operate unprofitable railroad lines and to provide safer services.



Thessaloniki, March 16, 2023

Right from the beginning of the period of austerity decreed by the financial oligarchy and its organizations, OSE made major cuts to its budget, which led to more layoffs and less hiring, less training, less maintenance of equipment and infrastructure, and less investment.

By the end of the 2000s, Greece's rail network had a workforce of more than 6,000 people. In 2017, after the privatization of TrainOSE and its sale to the Italian company, it is estimated that the workforce nationwide was around 750.

Rail workers who spoke to the media in the days following the disaster said that the remote monitoring and signalling systems, which control the flow of trains and guide workers driving the trains, had not been working properly for years, or were simply not put into operation.

The Larissa station, for example, has only a local signalling system that follows the trains for about five kilometres. This means that stationmasters have to communicate with each other and with workers driving the trains via radio to fill in the gaps, and signals are operated manually. The section where the trains collided is considered a "black hole." Remote monitoring and automated signalling systems had been designed but not yet implemented. A former Larissa stationmaster told the media that OSE had a remote monitoring system in place from 2007 to 2010 in the section where the disaster occurred, but that the system gradually broke up as lack of funding and staffing cuts led to poor maintenance of the equipment.

In 2014, the media reported, OSE commissioned an overhaul of the remote signalling and traffic control system that was to be completed in 2016. But nearly a decade later, the equipment has not

been installed across the entire 2,500 kilometre rail network.

After shamefully invoking human error to justify the disaster, and under people's pressure, the Greek government had to say publicly that if the remote systems had been fully operational, "it would have been practically impossible for the accident to have happened."

These words have not appeased the people. Their actions and their demands are for accountability, which must include the complete reversal of the anti-social offensive and the building of a pro-social nation-building project based on an economy that serves the people and is controlled by the people. When demonstrators call for the resignation of the government, they are indicating that neo-liberal governments that do the bidding of the financial oligarchy are not fit to govern. The issue of political renewal to vest decision-making power in the people is raised in the most urgent manner by disasters such as this train tragedy that could have been entirely avoided.



Karditsa, March 8, 2023



Lefkada, March 8, 2023



Patra, March 8, 2023

(Photos: PAME)



Successive Train Derailments at Norfolk Southern
Firm Opposition to Dictate of Rail Monopolies
and Their Backing by U.S. Government



Train derailment near East Palestine, Ohio, February 3, 2023.

There have been three train derailments in less than two months at Norfolk Southern, one of the railroad monopolies that have formed an oligopoly controlling all freight rail transportation in the United States.

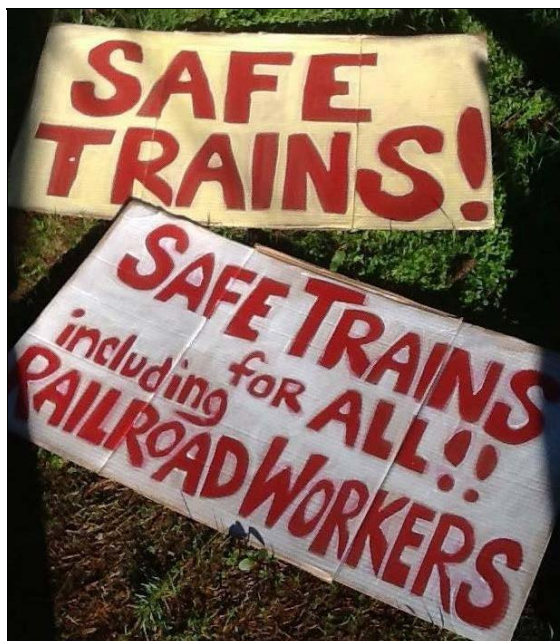
On February 3, a train carrying hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, in the U.S. state of Ohio. The derailment did not result in loss of life or injury, but it did result in a significant fire and release of hazardous materials into the air in the small community and surrounding communities, whose residents say they are still feeling the effects since the derailment.

On March 4, a train derailed near Springfield, Ohio, and on March 9, a train derailed in Calhoun County, Alabama. According to media reports, these trains were not carrying hazardous materials, which Norfolk Southern used to downplay the repeated derailments that occur in its business.

In addition, on March 7, a Norfolk Southern employee was killed in Cleveland, Ohio, in a collision between a train and a dump truck. This is the third employee killed since late 2021 at Norfolk, according to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

The February 3 Derailment

On February 3, a freight train carrying hazardous chemicals, including vinyl chloride, derailed and then exploded and burned in the Ohio community, East Palestine. The train consisted of three locomotives and 149 cars. Thirty-eight cars derailed, including 11 tank cars carrying hazardous materials that subsequently ignited, fuelling fires that damaged 12 other non-derailed cars. The derailment resulted in a fire that lasted several days.



On February 6, to prevent an explosion, state and local officials decided to conduct a controlled burn. Approximately 1.1 million pounds of toxic material -- vinyl chloride -- was diverted to a trench away from the train derailment and burned while firefighters extinguished the flames. Vinyl chloride is a highly toxic product that is carcinogenic. The burning released highly toxic hydrogen chloride and phosgene into the air. Some 2,000 residents, about half of the population of East Palestine, were ordered to evacuate their homes.

Local residents were allowed to return to their homes on February 8, but they noted health problems, including headaches and rashes, and are concerned about the persistence of pollutants and possible future complications from exposure to the derailment chemicals. In particular, they say they fear they will end up with cancers within a few years. When they returned, they found many dead fish and frogs in the waterways.

Local activists in East Palestine report that their activism led Norfolk Southern to agree to a limited relocation plan for some residents affected by the train derailment last month. They add that they have no intention of abandoning their demand for justice for the thousands of area residents who are struggling as a result of the accident.

The company's proposal to offer financial assistance to residents who live within a mile of the accident site "is not enough," said River Valley Organizing (RVO), which produced a list of five demands for residents in and around East Palestine.

"We're going to keep pushing until the community gets the help it is owed. We need to stop letting Norfolk Southern put their profits ahead of the people of our community," said RVO.

The community's demands include safe housing and independent environmental testing. For example, the community is asking for the relocation of anyone who wants it at Norfolk Southern's expense, as well as independent testing of soil, water and air, medical testing and monitoring at no cost to residents, and safe disposal of toxic waste, all paid for by Norfolk Southern. The community's demand is to stop putting profit above people.

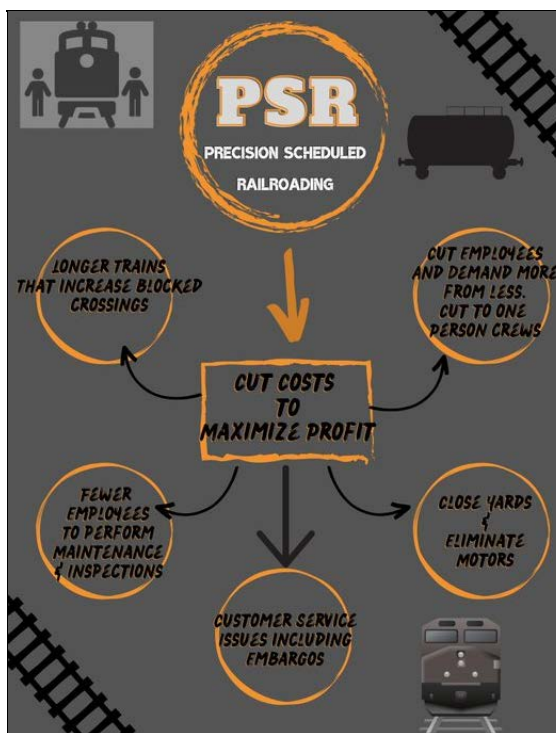
On March 7, the NTSB announced a special investigation into Norfolk Southern's "safety culture" after the third serious accident in less than two months. The NTSB is a federal agency mandated by Congress with investigating accidents in civil aviation, railroads, highways, and maritime transportation and making recommendations related to transportation safety.

On March 14, the state of Ohio filed a civil lawsuit against Norfolk Southern Railroad after the derailment in early February that has raised fears of serious environmental consequences. The state is seeking damages, civil penalties and a "declaratory judgment that Norfolk Southern is liable," the state's attorney general said.

"The Precise Scheduled Railroading"

As for the immediate cause of the derailment, the NTSB believes it was caused by the failure of a wheel bearing due to overheating. Two of the hot box detectors lined up along the track recorded rising temperatures on the suspect car, but they had not reached the critical threshold that triggers an alarm for the crew to stop the train. By the time the alarm was triggered by a sensor near the point where the train derailed, it was too late and while the crew worked urgently to stop the train it derailed. Immediate demands have been presented to reduce the distance between hot box detectors along the track and to install sensors in the trains to inform the crew of wheel bearing and axle anomalies before they overheat.

The workers identify much deeper causes for the derailment and put forward demands that such events not be repeated. In particular, they denounce the dangerous dictate of the railroad monopolies in the name of the so-called "Operating Ratio" and "Precision Scheduled Railroading" (PSR).



The official definition of Operating Ratio is the percentage of operating expenses to revenue. Operating expenses include wages and benefits for workers, which are considered a cost to be reduced. The logic given by the financial oligarchy, is that the lower the percentage of expenses to revenue, the better shape the company is in.

The official definition of PSR emphasizes keeping trains moving all the time, combined with keeping cars moving, which are picked up off the road and added to trains, regardless of length, weight, content, and speed of train, in the name of accurate car pickup and delivery schedules. Six of the seven largest freight railroads (called Class 1) have adopted this policy. It's a disaster for train maintenance and for the health and safety of workers and the public.

Here's how one rail worker describes this specific rail operation:

"I assure you, waiting for that call to run a 16,450-foot PSR train is dreadful: We all know what can happen, at any moment. A pall of dread for 12 to 17 or more hours awaits. Already, these trains are not big enough for the carrier. We must pick up more cars for the PSR dream, with a conductor 13,800-feet away, backing up into a rail yard to get more cars."

Train maintenance has been drastically reduced, worker fatigue and health and safety problems have increased. Many rail workers have left the industry because of these untenable conditions

while thousands more have been permanently laid off. It is estimated that the major freight carriers employed 30 per cent fewer workers in 2022 compared to 2018.

Such is the obsession with keeping trains and cars moving continuously. Workers from the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, a division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, denounced Norfolk Southern's failure to provide the necessary protective equipment to workers who had to breathe in the toxic fumes caused by the derailment and burning of toxic materials while they were repairing the track.

The anti-labour and anti-community activities of the big railroad monopolies go hand in hand with the self-regulation granted to them by the U.S. government. The government and its agencies make audits, observations, recommendations, and sometimes issue violation notices, but the rail oligopoly made up of the industry's largest monopolies, is considered the ultimate authority on rail operations.

In December 2022, President Joe Biden and Congress signed into law a collective agreement for more than 100,000 rail workers, that had been rejected by the majority of workers. This agreement denies workers' demands for improved conditions that would alleviate their fatigue, prevent them from being constantly on call, and subject to discipline if they do not respond to a call to work when they have had insufficient rest since their last shift. The President and Congress have prohibited these workers from striking for their just demands.

U.S. rail workers are strongly demanding that the so-called Precision Scheduled Railroading system be declared illegal and that a new rail system be established over which the workers who operate it have control. They argue that their working conditions are the conditions of the operation of railroads.

For further information on the imposition of a contract on the U.S. railway workers [click here](#).

(Photos: Gen Z for Change, Fight for 2-person crews, Railway Workers United)



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