



# TEAMSTERS CANADA RAIL CONFERENCE DIVISION 320



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**Subject: Toronto Star article on Railway Safety.**

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This article was posted in Toronto Star today. Brother Brehl is found quite often speaking out about railway safety, or lack thereof. Keep up the good work Brother!

In Solidarity,

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## Safety is a slow train to nowhere



Fire crews and other emergency workers confront the mess created after a Canadian Pacific freight train derailed on Nov. 10, 1979, in Mississauga.

"Mississauga is closed until further notice."

That's how reporter John Brehl started the main news story on the front page of the *Star* a day after the Mississauga train derailment three decades ago. As usual, my father was succinct and clear, conveying the seriousness of the situation without exaggeration.

Tomorrow marks the 30th anniversary of that high-octane international news story and near-catastrophe that turned one of Canada's largest cities into a ghost town with more than 220,000 people evacuated from their homes.

On Nov. 10, 1979, just before midnight, a 106-car Canadian Pacific freight train left the rails and sent a horrifying propane fireball 1,500 metres in the air as rolled-over tankers simultaneously leaked poisonous gases like chlorine into the environment.

Miraculously, no one was killed and people returned to their homes a week later.

In the wake of that derailment, new regulations for transporting dangerous goods were meted out and railway safety procedures were beefed up.

But is the public really safer today with freight trains rumbling through ever more crowded urban areas? Has the economic recession impacted railway safety?

Unfortunately, the recession has definitely had a negative impact on railway safety.

I know this because rail traffic is down (between 15 and 20 per cent, according to the railways themselves) but accidents are up on a comparative basis.

Imagine what could happen when traffic returns to pre-recession levels, as it surely will, either next year or in 2011 or 2012?

With fewer trains rolling, the recession would have been the ideal time for railways to step up maintenance on machinery and investment in track infrastructure that has lagged since the 1990s.

Unfortunately, the opposite has occurred: traffic is down; maintenance is down; and accidents are up.

The sad reality is that three-quarters of railway accidents and derailments are caused by track and/or machinery failure.

During the recession, the railways have presented "efficiency plans" to shareholders and cut back spending on track maintenance and machinery.

For example, CP Rail announced two separate cuts this year to its capital investment budget for track infrastructure and the locomotive fleet. The overall reduction amounts to more than 30 per cent, or about \$300 million.

Mechanical departments, where the locomotives and cars get repaired and inspected, have been hit hard. In Ontario alone, hundreds of repair workers and safety inspectors at CP have been laid off in recent months. Nationally, when you add CN Rail, the number climbs well into the thousands of what the railways call "safety critical" and "safety sensitive" positions.

In terms of track, the railways are rife with "slow orders," which mean trains must slow down in these areas because it could be dangerous to go at regular speed.

The railways are doing bare-bones maintenance in the recession and this is nothing short of a game of Russian roulette. How long can they depend on good luck and gravity to keep the trains on track, especially when millions of Canadians live so close to main rail lines?

Last June, for example, there was a serious derailment in Oshawa that forced more than a thousand people to be evacuated from their homes. Had that train been carrying dangerous commodities, we could have had another Mississauga disaster, or worse, in the GTA.

Even before the railways began cutting back on maintenance, we were seeing a dangerous trend in Canadian rail safety over the past decade. In the last 10 years, we've averaged three derailments or train accidents per day in Canada.

Think about that for a moment. The Transportation Safety Board has a record of more than 10,000 derailments and accidents since 1999. Most were minor, many were major forcing evacuations and some had potential to be another Mississauga.

Where do we go from here?

First, it is time for the federal government to step in and step up.

Stephen Harper's Conservative government must be lauded for earmarking an unprecedented \$44 million of new money in the last budget for Transport Canada to increase safety inspections and enforcement on the railways.

But more can be done.

The government could help by investing infrastructure money in the dozens of struggling smaller railways and prod CN and CP to reinvest some of their profits during the recession into safety.

For example, the *Star* reported last month that CN recorded a third-quarter profit of \$446 million and CP had a \$195.4 million quarterly profit. Still, money that could be used to fix track and machines is being cut from railway budgets.

We recognize corporations must make money long-term to survive, but this recession does not mean profits can come before public safety.

Then there's enforcement. Transport Canada needs more regulatory power to ensure public safety is the top priority at the railways.

One cost-effective and quick way to do this would be to order railways to set up joint committees with workers to investigate systemic safety problems. Transport Canada's Advisory Council on Railway Safety does great work, but it looks at big-picture industry issues, not "down on the ground" incidents that are occurring every day.

Let's work together, find them and fix them.

Canada's railway system is the backbone of our economy by efficiently moving resources and products from coast to coast. It's also a key component in our economy going forward as it is the "greenest" way to transport goods.

But nothing is more important than public safety.

Mississauga reminded us of this 30 years ago.

And if we forget it, we could have another accident in any crowded urban centre in Canada.

*William Brehl is a member of Transport Canada's Advisory Council on Railway Safety and president of Teamsters Canada Rail Conference's Maintenance of Way Employees Division, based in Ottawa.*