

Canada's newspapers whitewash government culpability in Lac-Mégantic tragedy

Carl Bronski
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Over the past week the editorial boards at Canada's mainstream newspapers have climbed over one another in their attempt to misdirect their readers as to the causes of the Lac-Mégantic rail disaster.

Ruled out of bounds by the media is any serious examination of the corporate and government drive to deregulate industry, cut infrastructure maintenance costs, and reduce staffing levels while increasing the pace of work and ceding responsibility for all day-to-day safety monitoring to management through so-called "self-regulation." Instead, the media has propounded about a reputed "once-in-a-lifetime" sequence of unfortunate events, the purported culpability of the train driver, and the "inevitability" of disasters in the modern world.

Shortly after midnight on July 6 a runaway Montreal, Maine & Atlantic (MMA) freight train comprising 72 mostly aging tanker cars filled with crude oil crashed and exploded in the small Quebec town of Lac-Mégantic, killing 50 people, incinerating the downtown core, and driving 2,000 people from their homes.

The train, operated by a single crewman, had been left unattended on a relatively steep grade (in accordance with de-regulated, standard company practice) awaiting the arrival of a relief engineer to take the train further eastwards to its St. John, New Brunswick destination. The train had been parked, not on a siding, but on the main rail line, again in accordance with standard practice. The crewman reported that he had set 11 hand-brakes on various tanker cars along the length of the train prior to retiring to his hotel after a grueling 12-hour shift. Hand-brakes, if properly maintained by the company, are ostensibly designed to hold cars in place even without locomotive air-brakes.

The driver, in any case, had also set the air-brakes on the locomotives at the front of the train—although some of these forward brakes may have lost pressure after a local firefighting crew attended a small blaze in one of the

train's engines and shut down one of the five locomotives shortly after the driver had gone to his hotel. Following the extinguishing of the fire, the train was reportedly checked by an attending MMA railroad employee. Everyone then left. Shortly thereafter, the train began its deadly descent into Lac-Mégantic.

The horrific devastation that followed captured the attention, sympathy and outrage of much of the Canadian population. In the ensuing days local townspeople accused Edward Burkhardt, the cost-cutting chairman of MMA, of outright murder and excoriated the government for its policy of deregulation of the train industry. The response from one shell-shocked citizen of Lac-Mégantic was typical. When asked to explain the causes of the tragedy, she turned and screamed at the banks of television cameras that had descended upon the town—"Money! Money! Money!"

The well-heeled denizens of the country's newspaper editorial boards have promoted a very different and self-serving interpretation.

"Accidents happen," opined the deep thinkers at the *Toronto Sun*, Sun Media's flagship publication. People should "spare their senseless outrage against the oil industry and its carriers...Unless we are prepared to move Canada's entire population to Northern Alberta, then we have to somehow come to grips with the 0.1 percent chance of something going wrong during the delivery process of a very vital commodity that lacks any real or affordable alternative." And then the coup de grace from a daily that has been amongst the most enthusiastic boosters of Big Oil in Canada: "If anything, the tragedy that has befallen Lac-Mégantic should show all concerned that pipelines are safer means of transporting crude than railways."

The *Globe and Mail*, the country's leading mouth-piece for the Bay Street bankers, likewise pounced on the Lac-Mégantic tragedy to promote pipeline expansion.

Declared the *Globe*, “The probability of accidents involving trains carrying crude oil has been greatly increased by the shortage of pipeline capacity in North America...Pipelines are clearly safer. It is greatly hoped that the government of the United States will soon approve the building of the Keystone XL pipeline.”

In pushing the mercenary agenda of corporate Canada, the *Globe* thought it politic to keep from its readers the fact that the oil that ignited at Lac-Mégantic came from North Dakota’s Bakken field—deposits that will never be serviced by any pipeline. Nor did it consider it appropriate to raise the not inconsequential fact that countless other highly dangerous chemicals are transported daily across the country by train.

The *National Post* weighed in to the discussion to run interference for the government, cautioning against any “ill-timed contention that somehow Ottawa is to blame.” The piece, in its wisdom, felt it circumspect not to mention that successive Liberal and Conservative governments have overseen a shift to the “self-regulation” of railroad safety by transport companies over the past 15 years, that federal safety experts had warned that 80 percent of the country’s oil tanker stock was patently unsafe, or that the current Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper not only recently approved one-person train operation for MMA but has cut the safety budget for railroads, even as shipments of crude oil by train have increased by a whopping 28,000 percent since 2009.

In this, the editorialists were clearly following the lead of Canada’s Prime Minister. Harper, on the occasion of his visit to the disaster site, had sought to direct attention away from questions of regulatory failure. “It’s hard to imagine that we could have such an accident,” said the Prime Minister. “We have regulations to prevent these kinds of things.”

Indeed, when New Democrat Thomas Mulcair, leader of the Official Opposition in parliament, had the temerity to suggest in a television interview that the tragedy in Lac-Mégantic could be related to government cutbacks in “the wrong area,” the combined might of the nation’s media excoriated him for “politicizing” a horrific tragedy. Mulcair quickly backtracked from his mild reproach of government policy, denying that he had ever made the recorded comment.

André Pratte, the editor-in-chief of *La Presse*, the largest and most influential French-language daily in Quebec, has written a series of editorials defending the government and the big business program of deregulation:

“At present, there is no indication that gaps in regulation or inspection of the rail system are involved in this case. The railway companies are subject to a ton of regulations of all kinds, including on the configuration and inspection of braking systems.”

Pratte’s pontifications fly in the face of information offered by train operators familiar with the MMA line and by national safety bodies. In 2007, the Canada Safety Council wrote that deregulation “removes the federal government’s ability to protect Canadians and their environment and allows the industry to hide critical safety information from the public.” In 2011, an auditor-general’s report concluded that “Transport Canada has not designed and implemented the management practices needed to effectively monitor regulatory compliance.”

James Goodrich, a former locomotive engineer and yardman who had previously worked on the line passing through Lac-Mégantic, wrote to the *Montreal Gazette* last week to “speak out” against the growing whitewash by the country’s editorialists. “In my view,” he wrote, “what happened in Lac-Mégantic is linked to the continent-wide, 30 year erosion of work rules, procedures, equipment and infrastructure in the rail industry, and a culture of corporate acquisition by non-railroad interests that has led to deferred maintenance and deep cost-cutting.”

Goodrich pointed out that the tracks around Lac-Mégantic are in such poor condition that in some place trains have been limited to speeds of 5 miles (8 kilometers) per hour. “I have only seen order speeds of 5 mph twice,” added Goodrich, “after flash floods in Colorado, and in nearly abandoned Boston yards where no rail maintenance was being done at all.” The former railway man said that he does not see the trade unions as any bulwark against the government-backed corporate assault on workers’ rights and public safety. The railroad unions “have been gutted” in the last thirty years, have lost their voice, and face “irrelevance.”



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