

Dr. StrangeWeather

Or how I learned to stop worrying and love the 'bomb' train

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Is our weather getting funny?

Some bushes and flowers started to bloom near the end of January this year, and in the spring cherry blossoms were blooming weeks early. This capped a winter with extremely low snowfall in the mountains. The abnormal heat, plus the drought now covering 80 percent of the state, recently raised temperatures in the Willamette River above 70 degrees, killing chinook salmon as they made their way upstream to spawn.

In March, tribal leaders from the Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians converged in Portland to discuss this ongoing phenomenon of climate change. These changes, they said, were related to a pattern of global warming, and were imposing unique hardship on Northwest tribes. In 2013, the ATNI also passed a resolution opposing all new fossil fuel proposals in the Northwest, citing harm to their treaty rights, cultural resources, and land they held sacred. Now the ATNI are discussing plans for adaptation and mitigation, as well as how to undermine the root sources of climate change.

In addition to the sudden onset of strange weather, Portland has seen the abrupt arrival of strange, mile-long trains loaded with crude oil – a very unusual sight in the Northwest until just two years ago. In the event of a derailment or crash, these trains are known to increase the temperature of surrounding areas by several hundred degrees – a strange weather event by any standard. This phenomenon has become so common that the train engineers who run them actually call them “bomb trains.”

While the danger of unplanned explosions is universally recognized, the risks of strange weather, and the planned explosions that take place in our internal combustion engines, are typically less appreciated. But the connections are becoming more obvious as the figure of the oil train valiantly pulls them together.

The sudden appearance of oil trains in the Northwest is one effect of the unprecedented crusade for oil extraction in North America – one that has produced a massive wave of opposition from residents and elected officials. In Washington State alone, nine cities representing 40 percent of the state's population have passed resolutions that oppose oil trains. In Alberta, Canada, resistance to oil politics recently replaced a 44-year ruling party with socialists. And in Portland, anger against oil trains just smashed a city proposal to bring propane trains into the port.

In recent months rail workers have become increasingly vocal about the industry-wide safety problems that lead to fiery train accidents. They are also critical of the latest safety rules that allegedly protect the public from accidents. Rail Workers United, a coalition of rail workers and their unions, says that the best way to make trains safer is to increase worker control and self-management. They have proposed a host of reforms that profit-obsessed rail companies are not interested in hearing. For many rail-



Abby Brockway of Seattle stands on top of an 18-foot tripod to protest poor train safety.

PHOTO BY CHARLES CONATZER

side communities there is a parallel interest in community control over the railroads: no fossil fuel trains are safe for them as long as trains derail and the climate unravels. Together, the two movements are calling for a better future for our railroads and our environment, and demanding more public influence to safeguard both.

Who's in control? A retrospective.

On July 6, 2013, an oil train derailed and exploded in Lac Megantic, Quebec, killing 47 people. After the accident the CEO of Rail World, Edward Burkhardt, told the media that he blamed the single employee his company had charged with moving 2 million gallons of crude oil. Armed with his very best talking points, Burkhardt told the media “I think he did something wrong. It's hard to explain why someone didn't do something.”

According to reports, the lead locomotive's engine had problems in the past, but had been rushed back into circulation to save the company money on a standard repair. That engine caught fire the night before the disaster, and a local fire chief shut off the engine to stop fuel from flowing into the fire, inadvertently cutting the power to the train's air brakes in the process. The company told the lone crew member not to come back to the site, and instead sent two workers who did not have

experience with the braking system to confirm the train was safe. Later that night, while the engineer slept in a nearby hotel, the train rolled downhill from where it was parked, hurtling toward the city. The explosion incinerated half the city's downtown, and contaminated most of the remaining buildings with 1.5 million gallons of crude oil.

For CEO Burkhardt, the explanation was simple – the engineer should have set more brakes that did not rely on the engine. The following week, when asked if the crew was adequate for the cargo, Burkhardt told a press conference that “one-man crews are safer than two-man crews because there's less exposure for employee injury and less distraction.” Under financial pressure, the company had switched to one-person crews three years before, replacing on-board conductors with remote control systems, and saving about \$4.5 million every year. One month after the tragedy in Lac Megantic, the company filed for bankruptcy. Later that month Burkhardt expressed bewilderment when the police raided his corporate offices in Quebec.

Tiny crews on long and heavy trains

In March, a coalition of rail workers held a conference on rail safety in Olympia, Wash., informing audience members (including

myself) that the average train operator today suffers from chronic exhaustion and sleep deprivation. Many workers in attendance attributed this to inaccurate train-lineups that do not allow for proper rest. Due to the uncertainty of when it is called to work, a train crew can be assigned to move a train full of hazardous materials without the chance to achieve needed rest from their last assignment. And with full knowledge they will be penalized for refusing a train, workers can go over 24 hours with no sleep by the time a shift ends. This exhaustion is a chronic background problem for rail workers, they said. When combined with the near-constant dismissal of safety hazards from their managers, workers are left with waning confidence in their own safety – a development that should raise red flags for rail-side communities.

According to Ron Kaminkow, General Secretary of Rail Workers United, “There's no such thing as a safe one-person train.” Looking back over some recent derailments, the facts appear to back him up.

On May 14, an Amtrak train derailed in Philadelphia, killing eight passengers and sending over 200 people to the hospital. It was staffed by one person.

On Oct. 28, a sleep-deprived engineer in the Bronx fell asleep at his controls, causing his one-crew train to derail, killing four people and injuring more than 70.

On July 24, 2013 a single-crew-member train derailed in Santiago, Spain, killing 79 people and injuring 139.

Public officials commenting on these incidents have often focused on the technology that could have stopped the trains remotely if installed – something U.S. railroads are already required to utilize under federal law, despite constant extensions on their legal deadlines. But according to rail workers, this is just part of the problem. Rapid attempts at cost-cutting, they say, have affected both technological and human shortages, but when it comes to safety there is no comparison between them.

“There is no technology available today that can ever safely replace a second crew member in the cab of the locomotive,” say the BLET and SMART-TD rail unions.

Prior to 1967, Washington actually required six crew members on all trains. That law was repealed in 1967 after the rail corporations ran an initiative campaign that wiped it out. In the 1980s, the standard train crew was still five or six people across the country, but this was whittled to two people by the 1990s, and that has been the standard ever since. Now, through the use of new technology, the rail corporations have attempted to break down that number to one or even zero.

According to Herb Krohn, the Washington State Legislative Director for Smart UTU, the Puget Sound and Pacific Railroad already uses one-person crews to run trains loaded with hazardous materials – like the one that blew in Lac Megantic – including trains full of explosive gas. This line operates in Washington State between Centralia, Grays Harbor and Shelton.

In the aftermath of Lac Megantic, the

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