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Keeping the railroads safe

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THEY CUT through neighborhoods, criss-cross state lines and travel through busy metropolitan areas. They carry everything from passengers, merchandise and livestock to noxious chemicals such as chlorine and hydrochloric acid.

They're railroad cars, and one organized labor group is fighting to ensure the safety of this vital transportation system from the threat of terrorist attacks.

Members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters have organized a nationwide effort to educate state officials, first-response personnel such as fire, police and emergency professionals as well as the general public about the risks involved with a proposed effort to reduce the number of supervisors on-board rail cars from two to just one.

During a recent visit to the Ohio Valley, Local 800 (St. Louis, Mo.) Business Agent Robert J. Ramshaw explained that until recently, each locomotive was required to be manned by two individuals - one engineer and one conductor. Unless a federal ordinance prevents it, Ramshaw said that railroad companies may only allow one person onboard locomotives, a move which he said "increases the danger of derailment, vandalism and attack."

Teamsters members Carlos Lizarraga of Indiana, Keith Wear of Wheeling and John R. Hill of Youngstown have joined Ramshaw in this educational effort.

Wear explained that the Teamsters have organized a nationwide educational campaign "out of concern for jobs as well as the safety of the general public."

To illustrate the importance of rail safety, Ramshaw and his associates offered the example of a train carrying just one car containing chlorine, a chemical which nearly every town uses to purify water. "Just one car full of chlorine, if overturned, can impact everyone within a 15-mile radius," he explained. "It has the capability of killing 100,000 people." Ramshaw also noted that most trains carry a variety of chemicals in different cars, with the potential of creating "a chemical cocktail mix" if the train derails.

Hill said that having a two-person crew onboard allows the crew to compile reports of what hazardous materials are onboard the train - information which can prove vital to first-responders in the event of a crash. "Without this information," Hill explained, "emergency personnel must spend valuable time trying to find out what's on board, which can cost lives."

In addition to increased reporting, having a two-person staff is essential to keep an eye on both sides of the train, Hill explained. "One person can only keep an eye on one side of the train at a time," he said. "Having only one person trying to watch both sides could really lead to a catastrophe." Hill noted that the obstructed vision experienced by train conductors means that the train "could strike a vehicle and drag it for miles without the operator being aware of it."

Though railroad safety has become an international concern after terrorist attacks on railways and metro systems in London and Spain, Ramshaw noted that 90% of our nation's Homeland Security funding is set aside strictly for airline safety. "That means that railroads, vehicle and highways and ports must share just 10% of the budget," he explained. "Railroads travel through neighborhoods, past schools, and even through our capital city. One attack could impact hundreds of thousands of people."

Lizarraga described the proposed reduction in staff as "going backwards instead of forwards, to save a penny or two."

In addition to efforts to educate the public, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters is distributing petition letters addressed to Secretary of the United States Department of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff. These letters are designed for first-responder personnel, such as firefighters, police officers and medical workers and encourage the DHS and the Transportation Security Administration to "immediately implement a viable security plan to be enforced by the TSA."

For more information on the IBT or this campaign, visit the organization's web site at www.teamster.org.