

TEAMSTERS NEWS

International Brotherhood of Teamsters
25 Louisiana Avenue, NW • Washington, DC 20001 • www.teamster.org 202-624-6911 • fax: 202-624-6918

For Immediate Release
Jan. 6, 2010

Contact:
Galen Munroe (202) 624-6911
gmunroe@teamster.org

TEAMSTERS MARK FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF TRAGIC RAIL CRASH IN GRANITEVILLE, S.C.

Substandard Rail Switch the Major Cause

(Washington) – Today marks the fifth anniversary of the tragic accident in Graniteville, S.C., which took the lives of Teamsters Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) member Chris Seeling and eight others.

Seeling, a 28-year-old locomotive engineer, died after inhaling toxic chlorine gas fumes from the crash. The 2005 collision and chlorine leak injured another 554 people, 75 of whom were hospitalized. Seeling was relatively uninjured in the crash, but was overcome by toxic fumes, which caused his death.

If this preventable accident had occurred in the middle of the day, instead of the middle of the night, the number of casualties most likely would have been significantly higher. Monetary damages and costs are well over \$300 million, and vital public services were interrupted for days in the aftermath of the accident.

“Our thoughts are with the families whose loved ones perished as a result of this horrific accident,” said Jim Hoffa, Teamsters General President. “The best way to honor Brother Seeling and the others who died is to prevent another tragedy. Despite assurances from the rail corporations about the safety of their systems, our members still encounter substandard safety throughout the country. It’s not a question of if another accident will occur, it is a question of when.”

The crash, which was the result of a misaligned, un-signaled switch, was the catalyst behind several major safety initiatives that were passed in 2008 as part of the Rail Safety Improvement Act (RSIA) of 2008, among them is the mandated implementation of Positive Train Control (PTC) on lines carrying toxic by inhalation materials and the mandating of switch position detectors. Prior to the passage of the legislation, 40 percent of approximately 170,000 railroad mainline route miles were considered “dark territory” with no signaling systems or switch position detectors, including the line where this tragic accident occurred.

(MORE)

Page 2 of 2/Teamsters Mark Fifth Anniversary of Tragic Rail Crash in Graniteville, S.C.

Rules strengthening tank cars which carry toxic by inhalation (TIH) materials have also been promulgated. While the tank cars in the Graniteville crash were up to the new standards, many in service at the same time were not. Prior to the rule, about 60 percent of the nation's 60,000 pressure tank cars were built using ductile steel--brittle, untreated metal--which was the standard before 1989. These cars are permitted to remain in service for 50 years after their manufacture, so prior to the implementation of this rule they would have been in use until 2038.

"Implementation of PTC and the installation of switch position detectors in dark territory were some of the key improvements of the RSIA," said Paul Sorrow, National President of the BLET which represented Seeling. "While these improvements are finally beginning to be made thanks in large part to the work of the Teamsters Rail Conference, Brother Seeling's family and countless BLET and Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED) members, we must never forget this accident and its tragic consequences.

"The railroads have balked at the costs of implementing these technologies, but we can never forget the human cost to not implementing them. To the big railroads, it's a matter of dollars and cents. To rail workers it's a matter of life and death," said Sorrow.

The BLET and the BMWED are divisions of the Teamsters Rail Conference, representing more than 70,000 locomotive engineers, trainmen and maintenance of way workers who build and repair tracks, switches, and related rail infrastructure on freight, passenger and commuter rail lines across the United States.