

Charges laid in Lac-Mégantic rail inferno

Railway, three employees each face 47 charges of criminal negligence

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The Montreal, Maine and Atlantic railway and three of its employees are to be charged Tuesday with criminal negligence causing death in connection with the Lac-Mégantic derailment.

Forty-seven people died after a runaway MMA crude oil train derailed and exploded in Lac-Mégantic on July 6, 2013. Millions of litres of crude oil spilled.

Thomas Harding, the lone engineer in charge of the train on July 6, was arrested Monday, along with MMA employees Jean Demaître and Richard Labrie, said Jean Pascal Boucher, a spokesperson for Quebec's director of criminal and penal prosecutions.

The three men detained by the Sûreté du Québec are to appear at the courthouse in Lac-Mégantic Tuesday afternoon to be formally charged, Boucher said.

According to a search warrant obtained by the SQ in July, Demaître was MMA's manager of train operations and Labrie was MMA's railway-traffic controller at the time of the accident.

The three men and the company each face 47 counts of criminal negligence causing death, said René Verret. The maximum sentence, if convicted, for criminal negligence causing death for a person is life in prison.

There is also a possibility of fines, Verret said.

For a company, if convicted, there are no minimum or maximum fines, Verret said. A judge would decide the amount of the fine imposed.

MMA filed for bankruptcy protection in August. The company is in the process of being sold to Railroad Acquisition Holdings LLC, an affiliate of New York-based Fortress Investment Group for \$14.25 million US.

The sale is expected to be completed next week.

Verret said the police investigation is ongoing. He did not rule out the possibility that other charges could be laid in connection with the derailment.

In late March, a Crown spokesman said the province's director of criminal and penal prosecutions had begun a review of the file.

In a statement released late Monday, the Crown said it elected to file the charges after an analysis of the evidence gathered at the scene.

Verret said the Crown had hoped to announce the charges earlier but had a number of steps to go through before making a formal announcement. "We had to do so much today - we had to get warrants for three people and for the company and then we had to find these people," Verret said.

"And of course we had to also inform the families in Lac-Mégantic and the person in charge there."

Coincidentally, a news conference is planned in Lac-Mégantic on Tuesday involving the rebuilding of the Musi-Cafe, the establishment in the heart of town where many people perished. Mayor Colette Roy Laroche and Musi-Cafe owner Yannick Gagné are expected to attend.