

## Editorial

### *A rail emergency—in the United States*

One sometimes wonders what it will take to make the current generation of Baby Boomers, and other citizens, understand the reality of the physical economic collapse which has occurred simultaneously with, and in inverse proportion to, the rise in the financial “prosperity” of the U.S. and world economy. Lyndon LaRouche once used to joke about how many Americans believed that you didn’t have to ensure farmers parity prices, because milk came from the grocery store! There is a similar mentality in virtually every area of the economy.

If we wait until there is a total breakdown in power, water, and other infrastructure, it may well be too late to prevent mass death on a scale unseen since the Black Plague.

There should be a warning signal in the current rail emergency in the western part of the United States. For decades, it was a legendary signal of economic underdevelopment, that a nation would be unable to get its food to market. In many Third World countries, and communist nations like Russia, upwards of 25% of the grain would lie and rot on the ground, because there were not sufficient rail cars, or rail lines, or fuel, or harvesters, to ship the food to where it was desperately needed.

Lo and behold, *today*, in the American Midwest, we are approaching the same situation. Thanks to the deregulation and consolidation of vital rail transport, the transport of food from our nation’s granary is heavily dependent upon *one* railroad. And that railroad, Union Pacific, has so downsized and asset-stripped its operation, that it cannot handle the job.

As of late November, there were over 100 million bushels of corn and sorghum lying on the ground outdoors—about 70 million in Nebraska, 30 million in Kansas, and some in Iowa and in Minnesota. Grain is piled up in mountains in these areas, waiting for rail cars which are stuck in other parts of the stripped-down rail network, and unable to be protected from the elements for lack of storage facilities.

In early December, the Surface Transportation

Board, a Federal agency, extended emergency orders on Union Pacific, which require that the railway report weekly on its progress in overcoming the bottlenecks and congestion now tying up freight movement. Jan. 1, 1998 was set as the date Union Pacific was supposed to be running smoothly, but this did not happen. Instead, rail service deteriorated.

While the result of this emergency is visible in the piles of grain on the ground, it is also reflected in the pile-ups at ports, from Houston, to New Orleans, to Los Angeles. Delays in coal shipments have affected power plant operation in numerous Midwest states, and the rate of accidents and injuries on the rail lines is way above that of other railroads. This is directly related to not only the state of maintenance, but to the fact that reduced crews are being worked 12-hour shifts, and sometimes for up to 14 days in a row.

There are very clear conclusions to be drawn from this situation: Lack of investment in maintaining and building infrastructure ultimately catches up with you. And the great, recent “success” story of the U.S. economy is built precisely upon the fact that there has been disinvestment in physical infrastructure, like rail, water, and power, since the early 1970s! We have built up a deficit in the trillions of dollars, a deficit which will, sooner or later, hit us with water main breaks, bridge collapses, power shutoffs, and lack of transportation of vital goods.

This is a problem which must be addressed *internationally*, of course, if we are to prevent disaster on a world scale. But the foretaste of disaster with the rail emergency should be used to educate our fellow citizens now. We have to get government back into its rightful business of providing vital infrastructure, for the health and welfare of our citizens. That’s going to mean cheap public credit for massive public, or public-private, construction projects, replacing and upgrading our deteriorating transport, energy, and water facilities—along with the Great Projects, such as Land-Bridge development corridors.

Let’s get the trains moving again.