

Thomas Mulcair links Lac-Megantic disaster, ‘gutting’ of regulations by Conservatives

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NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair suggests the rail disaster that killed 47 people in the Quebec town of Lac-Megantic last month may have resulted from years of industry deregulation.

In a speech before members of the United Food and Commercial Workers International union in Chicago — home of the Montreal, Maine and Atlantic railway’s parent company and board chairman Ed Burkhardt — Mulcair laced into Conservatives on both sides of the border who say organized labour is a thing of the past and that the economy is best served when left to its own devices.

Just as cuts to food safety led to the “largest beef recall in Canadian history” last year, he said in prepared remarks, “years of loosening environmental protections” led to a massive oil spill from a Michigan pipeline into the Kalamazoo River.

“Across the board, conservative governments are gutting the rules meant to protect the public and imposing industry self-regulation instead,” he argued. “Experts from the Transportation Safety Board and Transport Canada are still investigating the role decades of deregulation played in the tragedy of Lac-Megantic.”

It’s not the first time Mulcair has drawn a link between government cuts and the deadly train explosion, and some have accused him of using the disaster to score political points.

But in his speech Tuesday, Mulcair argued that by “dismantling” health, safety and environmental protections as a “path to prosperity,” pro-deregulation

governments have “sacrificed our long-term prosperity for their short-sighted political gain.

“There’s a common sense role for the government to play in protecting the public,” he said. “Ensuring working men and women earn a fair wage. Ensuring banks and large companies play by the rules. Ensuring the food we eat and the air we breathe are safe. Governments that gut their role do so at our peril.”

In his speech, Mulcair said the North American labour movement is at a “pivotal moment” and that many gains made over the years are now “under attack.”

He suggested “open hostility” towards workers is a “source of pride” among neo-conservatives and liberals and slammed Canadian cuts to health care, increases in the age of retirement, changes to employment insurance, “heavy-handed” back-to-work legislation and the increased reliance on lower paid temporary foreign workers. He also railed against anti-union legislation in the United States.

“Conservatives like to argue that there’s no real need for labour unions these days. Sure, maybe unions had their place in the shadows of the Great Depression where income inequality was rampant and sweatshops were commonplace,” Mulcair said.

“It’s an argument based more on ideology than on fact. The truth is, today we face levels of income inequality not seen since the Great Depression.... Governments around the world have watched a generation of middle-class jobs disappear and yet they have done nothing to create the next generation of middle-class jobs.

“Let there be no mistake: A strong labour movement is as essential in our society today as at any time in our history,” he added.

Speaking at the union’s annual convention — which drew about 2,500 delegates and included fellow guest speakers Nancy Pelosi, the U.S. House minority leader, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn and actress Ashley Judd — Mulcair congratulated union members for “re-energizing and revitalizing the labour movement.”

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He also spoke of his ties to the union, noting UFCW Canada national president Wayne Hanley officially nominated him for leadership of the New Democratic Party during its convention last year.

According to Mulcair's office, the NDP leader was not paid for his appearance though his travel and accommodations were covered by the union. Spokesman George Smith said Canada's ethics watchdog was consulted and assured the arrangement was "no problem" so long as the party submits supporting documentation no more than 60 days after the event.