

Listuguj blockade lifted on 25th day, allowing rail traffic resumption

Gilles Gagné

LISTUGUJ – After reaching an agreement with Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, protesters who had formed a railway blockade on February 10 lifted it 25 days later, on the afternoon of March 5 at 4 p.m.

Mr. Lévesque indicated that the agreement pertained to “after blockade conditions,” in order to maintain goodwill relations between the transporter, a non-profit company under municipal control, and the protesters.

Removal of the Listuguj blockade came about three hours after the removal of the Kahnawake one, which was the second last barricade in Canada.

“It is of prime importance that such a problem doesn’t occur again in the future. It would be very difficult to recover from a second blockade,” stated Mr. Lévesque shortly after negotiating the barricade lifting.

Two hours later, as the protesters were removing the barricade, Luc Lévesque added that he wishes to see the ministry of Native Affairs “conduct discussions so to avoid another blockade.”

The mood was a mix of relief and fatigue in the ranks of demonstrators as they were collecting the signs and the material used to make shelters. They didn’t talk to all the media but Raquel Barnaby indicated to Radio-Canada that their goals had been reached.

They wanted the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to leave the traditional land of British Columbia’s Wet’suwet’en First Nation. They also wanted the hereditary chiefs of Wet’suwet’en to get an agreement proposal regarding the Coastal GasLink project. The hereditary chiefs are against the project and they are currently reviewing a proposal that could allegedly change the path of the pipeline.

Luc Lévesque says after 25 days of standstill, filled with hopes, disappointments, lay-offs, and talks, the Gaspésie Railway Society staff wants “to move on to something else and simply resume the rail service as soon as possible.”

Up to 150 freight cars loaded with windmill blades, cement, lumber and woodchips were stranded east of Listuguj after February 10. The first train, consisting of 72 cars carrying 48 windmill blades, left



Photo: G. Gagné

Luc Lévesque, director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, is relieved that the barricade was lifted. There is a lot of work ahead to reassure the customers though, he says.

Nouvelle four hours after the blockade lifting on March 5. That train was initially supposed to leave New Richmond for Texas on February 15, nineteen days earlier. It had been in Nouvelle since February 29 because of a first failed attempt to pass in Listuguj that evening. An agreement reached with some demonstrators was rejected by others.

On March 5, Luc Lévesque expected to return to normal operations within five days, which meant delivering to Canadian National, the 150 cars stranded east of Listuguj and taking delivery of the numerous freight cars, in excess of 200, immobilized in Matapédia and Mont-Joli before being sent to their customers, namely Temrex, McInnis Cement and LM Windpower.

Considering that the Gaspésie Railway Society delivers roughly 100 carloads to CN in Matapédia weekly, that the blockade lasted close to four weeks and given the 150 cars that were waiting for delivery, the transporter probably lost 250 carloads between February 10 and March 5. Its lost revenues amount to at least \$500,000 for the stretch. Only a part of that shortcoming is recoverable, including windmill blade traffic.

“We were afraid to lose permanently that windmill blade traffic at one point,” states Luc Lévesque about the transporter’s largest source of revenues. Cement hauling contracts were also a source of concern for the Gaspésie Railway Society.

“We will now have to manage many consequences over the next weeks,” notes Mr. Lévesque, referring to the de-

livery schedule of windmill blades to southern United States construction sites, as they are tied to a strict installation schedule.

“We will have to reassure customers about the reliability of rail transport,” he says. For a while, he also feared that the Kahnawake blockade would be the only one to draw news coverage because it was close to Montreal “while the consequences were way worse in the Gaspé Peninsula.”

Even if Quebec Premier François Legault stated that he would seek compensations from the federal government because of the financial losses caused by the blockades, Luc Lévesque has “no expectations” on that point.

“We receive an annual grant from the Quebec government and we will probably rearrange some aspects of it in order to recoup some money,” he points out concerning the \$2.5M grant.

Had the blockade lasted longer, the Gaspésie Railway Society would have moved its cement, lumber and woodchips transshipment operations to Matapédia on March 9 in order to keep its customers. “It would have cost a lot of money but we were ready to do it in order to maintain good relations with the customers,” says Mr. Lévesque.

The blockade lifting occurred eight hours before the end of the period covered by a February 25 injunction stipulating that the protesters had to lift the barricade. The injunction never came close to being enforced, as the Sûreté du Québec and the Listuguj Police Department always ruled out that option.