

Fear persists in Ohio



Photo> ABC 6

By María Josefina Arce

Life in East Palestine, in the U.S. state of Ohio, has been seriously disrupted since the beginning of the month. A train carrying highly hazardous materials derailed on the outskirts of that town, causing a fire, an unfortunate event surrounded by little and no transparent information from the authorities.

Uncertainty and fear has caused the event among the population, as the train of 150 cars was carrying five of them loaded with vinyl chloride, a highly carcinogenic material that can cause respiratory symptoms, headaches, dizziness and liver damage.

But it was also carrying other potentially toxic chemicals that were reported many days later. It was only 72 hours after the derailment that it became known what the train was carrying.

The event has also been surrounded by multiple contradictions. At first, the authorities ordered an evacuation that was "a matter of life and death", a red zone, with danger to life, and a yellow zone, with risk of injury and lung damage.

However, five days later the authorities assured that it was safe to return to the homes, even though the media pointed out that the air conditions had not yet been measured.

The quality of the water has been another unclear issue, while assurances were given that it was not contaminated, but calls were made to drink bottled water, while thousands of dead fish have appeared in the nearby river.

Environmental activists have criticized the lack of transparency of the authorities and Norfolk Southern, the company that owns the train and that just a week after the incident in East Palestine was also the protagonist of another derailment, this time in the outskirts of the city of Detroit, in the state of Michigan.

Trade unionists have denounced that railroad companies neglect maintenance and safety measures for the sake of greater profitability, and have called for stricter regulations.

They point out that the operating system in force since 1990, identified as PSR, Programmed Precision Railways, and which seeks to reduce shipping times and costs, has led to enormously long trains with less and less crew.

The digital media La izquierda Diario specifies that the U.S. railroad industry decreased by 25% its workforce between 2017 and 2021, generating greater pressure on workers who demand optimal conditions to perform their work.

In fact, at the end of last year, tense days were experienced in U.S. territory due to the conflict between the railroad companies and the unions of the sector, which threatened to go on strike if a more favorable collective bargaining agreement was not adopted and the so-called PSR was eliminated.

But Congress and President Joe Biden intervened and in two days a law was passed to avoid the strike, which was not supported by all the unions in the sector, as it did not respond to their main demands.

For many, a collective bargaining agreement was forced and social dialogue was avoided in order to avoid economic losses. Senator Bernie Sanders stated, "There is no clearer example of corporate greed than what we saw today in the railroad industry."

And while seeking to avoid affecting profits, the door is left open to serious accidents like the one in Ohio, a possibility that railroad workers had long warned about because of working and safety conditions on freight trains.

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