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NO MORE WIDOWS & ORPHANS, MR. ALLEN

The latest weapon used by terrorists to kill civilians in Iraq is chlorine gas, which *The New York Times* describes as "fatal after only a few concentrated breaths."

The U.S. Naval Research lab warns that chlorine gas leaking from a single railroad tank car could kill 100,000 people in a densely populated area.

Don't sniff now, but chlorine gas is what railroads regularly transport on most main lines and through population-dense areas. One mishap and, well, remember Graniteville, S.C., and Macdona, Texas.

When Association of American Railroads President Ed Hamberger told Congress, Feb. 16, that, "Nothing is more important to railroads than the safety and security of their operations," he shamelessly ignored that rail employees are not being properly trained to understand and deal with security threats.

Most often, a railroad's safety plan is no more than a written notice to "be alert" and "report anything suspicious." There are no classes. There is no formal training. There is no meaningful explanation of how to be alert, what to report, or even clear instructions as to how, where and to whom to report suspicious activity.

Shockingly, just a few weeks ago, after a train crew reported finding bomb canisters in what was supposed to be an empty rail car, railroad officials were more interested in disciplining the whistle blowers than in investigating the event.

When a Pittsburgh newspaper demonstrated how a terrorist could enter a rail yard with impunity, and, at will, place an explosive device on a tank car carrying deadly chemicals, the railroad response was that the journalist was trespassing on private property.

The *New York Times* won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of articles on railroad safety lapses. Railroads responded with an angry letter to the editor.

Rather than confronting the public danger of deadly hazmat traveling the rails, railroad executives are focusing instead on how to shift financial liability to others.

In our post-9/11 world, where terrorists have targeted railroads in other nations, American railroads -- rather than having their eyes wide shut -- should have, as a priority, improved employee training and fatigue mitigation.

Indeed, if railroads are not in the business of producing widows and orphans, then their chief labor

negotiator, Robert Allen, should be at the table with the UTU to solve the problem, rather than arrogantly walking away, as he did Jan. 25.

Rather than ignoring the alarm bells, railroad executives should be taking action to ensure their train crews, who are on the front lines in the fight against terrorism, are properly and fully trained. The public safety and national security demand action NOW.

With railroads covering their eyes and ears to the threat of massive casualties from from a terrorist attack on what is likely to be the next target -- railroads -- it is apparent that Congress must require that every front-line rail and transit employee receive comprehensive, mandatory security training.

Additionally, America needs more than the token 100 Transportation Security Administration professionals now assigned to oversee a surface transportation system of 140,000 miles of track, 7,000 miles of urban rail transit lines and 165,000 miles of bus routes.

Railroad lobbyists and labor negotiators may think an expanded safety program with comprehensive training is an inconvenient impediment to higher corporate profits that breed higher year-end executive bonuses; but we doubt the parents of children in schools that are within sniffing distance of railroad tracks feel the same way.

And we doubt lawmakers will want to take the risk, next Election Day, of facing voters who know Congress could have taken action to prevent a terrorist-related railroad calamity -- but didn't.