

Irish smallholders jailed for opposing gas pipeline

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For almost eight weeks, five men have been incarcerated in Dublin's Cloverhill jail for opposing compulsory acquisition orders taken out for the construction of a multi-billion-euro gas pipeline and terminal.

The five, Micheal O'Seighin, Willie Cordruff, Brendan Philbin, Philip McGrath and Vincent McGrath are far from being left-wing activists. They are small land owners and residents of the Erris peninsula in County Mayo, in the isolated far west of Ireland. But they have been subjected to such harsh treatment because their actions have interfered with a project that will bring millions in tax revenues to the Irish government and enrich substantial sections of the Irish bourgeoisie in the process. For this reason they are being made an example of what will happen to those who defy the major corporations on whom Ireland's economy depends.

The men's jailing is the culmination of a protracted dispute between energy corporations working closely with the Irish government on one side, against an alliance of smallholders, local politicians, environmental organisations and safety groups.

The jailed men insist that the gas terminal is being built in disregard for normal health and safety procedures. The disputed pipeline and terminal are intended to collect and process gas from the new Corrib field, which lies around 70 kilometres off Ireland's west coast and is estimated to hold between 5 and 7 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, worth between 15 and 21 billion euros.

Discovered in 1996, the field lies in deep water, 355 metres, in the Atlantic Margins area of the sea floor off the west coast of the British Isles. Drilling in the Atlantic Margin has been increasing in recent years as global oil and gas reserves have declined, prices have

increased, and new technology has made previously uneconomic reserves potentially worth exploiting.

Other reserves have been discovered in British-controlled areas, and the entire region is thought to be potentially lucrative, although technically difficult to exploit due to the deep water and bad weather conditions.

Gas from the Corrib field is intended to be injected at one end of the emerging European and Russian gas distribution network, whose primary purpose is to provide gas for the huge energy demands of the European Union. Two gas interconnectors already cross the Irish Sea to allow export to Europe.

The Corrib plan is also seen as an important part of the development of an all-Ireland energy infrastructure, which includes cross border pipelines into Northern Ireland and a gas "ring main" intended to supply gas to most areas of the island. Until now, Ireland has never had many indigenous power resources beyond those provided by peat bogs and small number of narrow seamed coal mines. Even after the development of hydropower and some discoveries of natural gas in the 1960s, 85 percent of energy requirements are imported, mostly via the UK.

The project to extract the Corrib gas is co-owned by Shell, via the formerly Irish state-owned Enterprise Energy, as well as the Norwegian Statoil company and US-owned Marathon Oil. Development costs are estimated at around 700 million euros.

In order to make the project viable, the developers have proposed that rather than being processed at sea, untreated gas would be piped at high pressure to an onshore processing terminal. Gas processing at an offshore wellhead requires expensive rigs and a large and highly qualified workforce. An onshore terminal is cheaper to build and operate, while the wellhead can be

maintained from the oil companies' existing operations in Scotland. A mere 27 workers are expected to be needed to run the onshore terminal. The companies argue that without this technique, the project will not be profitable and will not go ahead.

Opponents of the development say there are serious safety concerns and are demanding that an offshore terminal be utilised.

They argue that the high-pressure 92 kilometre pipe, pumping nine kilometres inland at between 150 and 300 Bar (compared with a domestic gas pressure of 4 Bar) is dangerous to those living in the immediate environs. The proposed terminal will also house huge gas storage facilities and will require the removal of thousands of tonnes of peat bog in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Originally intended to be completed in 2003, the Corrib project has been repeatedly put back while successive planning enquiries and investigations at county and national level have been carried out.

In 2003, An Bord Pleanála, the Irish planning authority, following extended hearings, refused planning permission on the grounds that transferring 650,000 cubic metres of bog was too dangerous due to possible slippage. In response, the Irish government threatened to introduce legislation to allow "critical infrastructure" projects to be pushed through.

In the end, the bog was dumped in another nearby location that was accepted by Mayo County Council, despite a serious landslide in the intervening period, which, had the pipe been in operation, could have ruptured it.

In October 2004, An Bord Pleanála approved the project.

Shell implemented compulsory acquisition orders on 35 plot holders whose land lay on the route of the proposed pipeline to the terminal. Twenty-eight of the land holders had previously agreed to give up their land. The remainder, whose land constituted 50 percent of Shell's requirements, refused to comply. Police were called on a number of occasions following some minor confrontations between the smallholders and Shell officials.

Earlier this year, Shell was granted an injunction to prevent the smallholders from continuing to prevent pipe-laying operations on their land. The smallholders continued to oppose Shell and five were imprisoned in

July for contempt. Shell promptly started work.

The jailings have shocked large numbers of people in Ireland and generated widespread protests. In July, 1,500 people rallied in Galway to protest. Supporters of the development have also been alarmed. Chris Tallott, a member of a local group which campaigned for the terminal on the basis that it would provide a much needed economic stimulus to an isolated and impoverished region, told the *Irish Times*, "I know these five men. I regret very much what has happened, and perhaps it has wakened us up to reality."

The issue is becoming a focus for more general distrust of the Fianna Fail/Progressive Democrat coalition government and has been successfully utilised by its political opponents. In response, Shell has been instructed by Dublin to dismantle part of the pipeline it had started to build in advance of full approval, and has announced a "programme of dialogue" to build support for the scheme.

But to date Shell has not lifted its court injunction against the five. And the court has insisted that the five must first purge their contempt and agree to obey the court order before being freed.

The government has since awarded exploration licences to Shell and a number of other energy companies for an area of over 15,800 square kilometres to the north of the Corrib field.



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