

Detroit area gas explosion reveals deadly state of pipeline infrastructure

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A report on the natural gas explosion in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, Michigan that took the life of a 58-year-old retired auto worker was released on Monday by utility company Consumers Energy. The explosion took place February 27 in a residential neighborhood due to a leak in the gas distribution pipeline crews were replacing.

The report, called “An Interim Report to Michigan Public Service Commission,” was issued three weeks after the company announced that to reaffirm its “safety commitment” after the explosion, it was taking “disciplinary action, including terminations for failure to follow established policies and procedures.”

In a timeline, the report asserts that the various crew members reported smelling gas at 4:30 p.m. Just before 5:00 p.m., the gas leak was reported to the company and a crew leader knocked on the door of the residence at 4232 Cooper Avenue—the home of Daniel Malczynski—receiving no answer. By 5:03 p.m. all the crews had left the site, just before the 5:07 p.m. explosion, which took Malczynski’s life.

The actions of Consumers Energy between the time of the tragic explosion and the issuing of its “interim report” amount to corporate damage control. The investigation into the incident focuses on the crews’ failure to “follow procedural requirements contained in the Consumers Energy gas standards manuals.” The firings are an attempt to scapegoat the workers and whitewash the company’s own role.

The report outlines certain initiatives the company will take to raise awareness of the dangers of gas explosions, including media placement for “Nose Knows” natural gas safety ads on Detroit television stations and the declaration of April as “Safe Digging Month.” These measures would be laughable if they weren’t so dangerously self-serving.

Detroit Free Press, published a page report called “Old Pipelines: A Danger Under Our Feet,” which details the dangerous state of Michigan’s natural gas pipeline system. According to the report, there are over 3,100 miles of old iron pipelines—both wrought-and cast-iron—which have been identified as at risk of “corrosion, cracking and catastrophic rupturing” by federal regulatory agencies.

These aging pipelines were responsible for several recent deadly explosions across the country, including:

- September 9, 2010— San Bruno, California —8 deaths, 52 injuries, 50 homes destroyed
- December 29, 2010— Wayne, Michigan —2 deaths, 3 injuries
- January 18, 2011— Philadelphia, Pennsylvania —1 death, 3 injured
- January 24, 2011—Fairport Harbor, Ohio—20 homes damaged
- January 26, 2011—Horseheads, New York—1 death, 2 injured, 1 home destroyed
- February 9, 2012— Allentown, Pennsylvania —5 deaths, 47 homes and properties damaged and destroyed
- February 10, 2012—Hanoverton, Ohio—brush fire

Carl Weiner of the Pipeline Safety Trust, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Bellingham, Washington, is cited in the newspaper, “this aging infrastructure needs to come out of the ground as soon as possible. They need to do the analysis of where the worst of it is and get the stuff out.”

The private companies responsible for maintaining the pipelines in Michigan are Consumers Energy and DTE Gas (formerly known as MichCon). Both companies have been criticized sharply for their declining rate of replacing old pipelines by the Michigan Public Service Commission (MPSC). Since

2004, Consumers Energy has replaced only 21 percent of its wrought- and cast-iron pipelines since 2004. The plan of DTE Gas to replace its cast-iron pipelines would take 42 years to complete, leaving most of them in the ground for over a century.

Old natural gas distribution pipelines, which include unprotected steel lines, are replaced with ones fabricated from advanced plastics, or specially coated steel. A cathodic process runs an electrical current through the pipeline as an additional protection against corrosion.

MPSC Manager of Gas Operations, David Chislea, in testimony in February 2012 denounced Consumers Energy's rate of pipeline replacement. He pointed to the company's 2010 plan to replace 25 miles of cast-iron pipeline each year. Instead, replacement actually decreased from 12 miles in 2010 to 10 miles in 2011.

Chislea testified, "If Consumers was committed to this accelerated replacement program, staff would have expected to see some increases in cast-iron replacement in 2011 beyond historic levels, but this was not the case." He added its rate of replacement of unprotected steel pipelines had a similar decline.

The dangerous failure to invest resources into the maintenance of its infrastructure parallels the increase in corporate profits. Consumers Energy's revenues rose to \$415 million in 2012 from \$324 million in 2010. DTE made \$610 million in 2012.

A DTE employee spoke to the WSWs on Consumers Energy's response to the February 27 explosion. "Whenever something happens like this, they keep everything silent. There is no discussion with employees about it. Any investigation takes place only in higher levels of management.

"I was at a company meeting where a manager actually bragged about how DTE spent less on recapitalization and infrastructure than any other utility company in the country. I looked around the room to see if anyone would say anything. No one did."

DTE and Consumers are focused on increasing their profits and cutting costs, which inevitably entail reducing the number of workers and increasing the workload of those that remain. Upper management is well aware that serious investment into safety will undermine profits and the payoffs to wealthy shareholders. The most likely outcome of this latest tragedy will be that Consumers Energy will use it to

press for further rate increases.

Far from holding the energy giants accountable, the Michigan Public Service Commission has turned a blind eye to these dangers, and is ultimately complicit in the deadly consequences.

The WSWs reported on the MPSC investigation into the role of private utility company DTE and its electrical division Detroit Edison in the fires that swept through Detroit residential neighborhoods, destroying 85 buildings during the violent windstorm in September 2010. The 12-week investigation completely exonerated the corporation of any blame for either the cause of the fires or their lack of response to residential customer calls complaining of poorly maintained cables and transformers.

Detroit Mayor David Bing claimed the fires were simply a "natural disaster" that no one could have predicted or prepared for. This crude lie was aimed at concealing the criminal actions of DTE—on whose corporate board Bing served for twenty years—and the Democratic Party, which subordinates the needs of the city's working-class residents to the profit interests of big business.



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