

Twenty-nine arrested at pipeline protests in Pennsylvania

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Pennsylvania State Police arrested 29 peaceful protesters in West Hempfield Township, part of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, as construction began on a multi-billion-dollar natural gas pipeline, called the Atlantic Sunrise Pipeline.

Williams Partners, headquartered in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is building the \$3 billion, 185 mile pipeline traversing Pennsylvania from north of Scranton, near the New York border, to south of Lancaster, near Maryland.

The protesters have been charged with defiant trespassing and could face as much as one year in prison. Twenty-three protesters were arrested en masse on Monday, October 16 while they sought to block construction equipment from beginning work on land that had been owned by the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, an order of Catholic nuns. Another six people were arrested on Saturday, October 21.

Protests have occurred in other areas throughout Lancaster County. In early October, 35 people used 18 vehicles to block the construction of an access road in Manor Township.

At another location in Conestoga Township, Williams Partners paid \$2.8 million to purchase a 107-acre property on which protesters had built an encampment nicknamed, The Stand, a reference to the protests last year against the pipeline near Standing Rock, North Dakota.

The principal organizer behind the protests is Lancaster Against Pipelines. According to its Facebook page, it is “a local, grassroots movement rooted in core principles of non-violence and mutual respect for each other, for our communities, and for the land we are working so hard to protect.”

Lancaster County residents say Williams Partners has trampled over their rights, seizing private land and

destroying natural resources for pure greed.

The nuns who owned the land in West Hempfield have filed a religious freedom lawsuit against the owner, Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Co., a part of Williams, and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to halt the construction, claiming that it violates what their religion allows land to be used for. The group built a small chapel in the path of the pipeline in protest and as part of the effort to block its construction.

The lawsuit has been dismissed by a judge in Reading, Pennsylvania, but the nuns have filed an appeal. Williams Partners has targeted this location first for construction in the hope of getting it completed before the lawsuit works its way through the courts.

The north-south pipeline will connect shale gas drillers with two existing pipelines near Wilkes-Barre and Williamsport on its northern side and its main line that brings natural gas up from the Gulf of Mexico to facilities in Philadelphia, New York and New Jersey.

The pipeline is 42 inches in diameter with a 50-foot-wide right of way and runs next to or through state parks and forests. Thirty-five miles of the pipeline will be laid in Lancaster County, traversing seven townships.

With a \$3 billion price tag, the pipeline is scheduled to be completed next summer. The company has issued public statements saying that it will bring inexpensive, American-sourced natural gas to “disadvantaged” people, and, what is rather Orwellian, claiming it will help the US “lead the world in combating climate change.”

The pipeline has been given the approval from both the Obama and Trump administrations as well as the state’s Democratic Governor Tom Wolf.

The bipartisan approval of the project makes clear the

subservience of the Democratic Party to corporate interests, in this case the oil and gas industry. The natural gas-rich Marcellus Shale region which lies in the northern part of the state has been opened up for fracking by the state government. Gas extraction companies only pay county and municipalities a tiny impact fee, while local waterways are routinely contaminated.

A WSWS reporter spoke to protesters in West Hempfield Township, as many passersby honked and waved to express support and bolster the protesters.

John, a member of Lancaster Against Pipelines, said the pipeline company is “trying to run it through here before the Nun’s case is heard in court. It is the only place in Lancaster County where pipe is getting laid and where there is resistance. The other place they are forcing it through is in Conestoga because of resistance.

“They [the corporation] have no concern for the environment; so many waterways here that can be contaminated, places where trees will never grow again. What if in 30 years a farmer digs up the ground or buries a dead cow and accidentally hits the pipe line and it blows up. Forty-five houses in this development will be eliminated—from the epicenter there is a quarter of a mile blast radius.”

“Reporters asked us ‘how this protest will be different because we are all white?’ We thought we might be treated a little better but it is not true, we have had people arrested.”

Last year, during the protests led by members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) in Cannonball, North Dakota, the Obama administration stood by as police launched fusillades of tear gas, projectiles, and water on peaceful protesters, some of whom received serious injuries.

Michael told the WSWS he came from Harrisburg to defend people’s “basic democratic rights.”

“The way the pipeline has been built is undemocratic. State Senator Martin was a former national gas lobbyist,” Michael explained. “He was on the Lancaster County commission and introduced an anti-protester bill. This would charge protesters for emergency responders. There are 203 gas lobbyists. The will of the people is separated from the law of the land.”

Mark, who had participated in the DAPL protests, said “If we let the fossil fuel industry have their way,

climate change gets worse. They will frack the crap out of Pennsylvania. It is a business and the fossil fuel industry will do a minimum required by law to protect the environment. They will destroy the water. I’m an independent medic. I’m here to protect the people. The first oil well was drilled in Pennsylvania by Rockefeller and I think Pennsylvania ranks third in corruption.”

Mindy, a local resident, said “The mainstream media is behind the corporations. I am a West Hempfield resident on a state road and I have violations occurring on my property. I’ve talked to the state police and municipality: no actions and no response from them! I am taking a stand. I have compassion for humanity and earth. We own a small mobile home park and Williams [the pipeline corporation] wants the property to put the pipeline through it. In February, they wanted to take pictures of the property trying to condemn it and gain access to part of the land.

“I cannot afford another lawsuit when I’m trying to fight a multi-million-dollar company. I talked to the project manager and he was silent. Where is my assistance? They don’t care if they destroy my well and then they will condemn my place to steal my land. Now I have to pay \$300 for water testing. They keep taking, taking, taking, the dreams and livelihoods of people.”

“I’m just ready to walk in there to get arrested,” Mindy concluded.



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