

Massachusetts: Lawrence residents speak out on the Columbia Gas explosions

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The September 13 natural gas explosions in Andover, North Andover, and Lawrence, Massachusetts are the result of decades of inadequate infrastructure spending, deregulation of pipeline inspections, and a private utility company worried only about its profits.

On September 23, the *Boston Globe* reported that, because of attrition, the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities had only two engineers performing field inspections of pipeline work across the state. Federal law says that the private utility companies, not government, are responsible for most inspections. The DPU's pipeline safety division has a total of only eight employees.

Lori Traweek, chief operating officer of the American Gas Association, told the *Globe* that “a state inspector may come out and look at the operations manual. But they do not go out and inspect the line itself. That’s the responsibility of the operator.”

The situation in Massachusetts’ Merrimack Valley has been made worse by the lockout—begun in June—of more than 1,200 skilled gas workers at National Grid. While Columbia Gas delivers gas to Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover, the National Grid workers have been unable to help rebuild, despite volunteering publicly.

United Steel Workers locals 12003 and 12012 have betrayed their members with the false promise that putting pressure on Republican Governor Charlie Baker and the DPU would end the lockout. For much of the summer, Local 12003 president Joe Kyrlo’s Twitter page was full of appeals to Baker. Now, after a much-vaunted September 11 meeting with the governor, at which National Grid was also present, and which predictably sold out the workers, the locals’ Facebook pages are full of bitter denunciations. Their erstwhile ally is now revealed to have accepted a campaign

donation from National Grid.

At a press conference in Lawrence on Friday, Baker, who is running for re-election, announced that the National Guard would be distributing thousands of hotplates and space heaters to residents who will not have gas service for up to two months.

There is suspicion that the overpressurization of the pipes happened at a job site at the intersection of South Union and Salem streets, where Feeney Brothers Utility Services was working as a Columbia Gas contractor. However, the National Transportation Safety Board has proclaimed that its investigation might not be complete for years.

What should be basic human rights—safe housing, hot water, and cooking facilities—have been replaced with a militarized force and unsafe appliances. Space heaters are notoriously unsafe, leading to hundreds of deaths across the US every year.

On Sunday afternoon, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Lawrence residents. Marielsie Tapia was waiting in a barbershop on South Union Street with her young daughter. Since losing her gas service on September 13, she has had to heat water in the microwave and rely on prepared food from the local market.

She expressed anger about the lack of information regarding what caused the explosions, saying, “there’s anger; we lost a lot of stuff; there’s anxiety, there’s uncertainty, like we don’t know if it might happen again.

“I have two kids and every time they hear a siren or something they think automatically we have to run,” she said.

Raoul and Adrian were watching an amateur baseball game at O’Connell Park. Raoul’s basement was damaged by fire on September 13. He’s been able to

return home and has electricity, but still has no gas or hot water.

When asked about the mood in the neighborhood, he said, “It’s a big mistake they made. That mistake cost a life. And it could have cost other lives. It doesn’t get any better, you know. It’s not going to get better, things are getting worse.”

Adrian said, “Everybody’s picking each other up, though, everybody’s coming together. It’s bringing us closer together than everybody thought. Everybody thinks we’re a bad city, we’re immigrants. No, we’re all hard workers here, we all put in our all to this city and make sure that everything’s all right, you know what I mean?”

“As a Lawrence citizen, it’s not cool seeing people in an environment like that where we have to run and evacuate kids,” he continued. “It’s not about black or white, it’s about being human, you know what I’m saying? We only got one race and it’s about the human race.”

When the WSWs reporter pointed out that there is plenty of money, but hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on the US military every year, Raoul responded, “I believe that them spending all that money on wars, it doesn’t make sense. I mean, it hasn’t made sense for years. I really don’t think they should have a choice to do that.”

The WSWs reporter pointed out that the choice of how to budget resources should be in the hands of the working class, and Adrian said “exactly.”

José Quiñones, an Uber driver, was playing dominoes with friends on the Campagnone Common in downtown Lawrence.

A friend of the Rondon family, whose 18-year-old son Leonel was killed by a home explosion, José said, “It’s a catastrophe that we’re suffering. We gotta heal, little by little.”

Of his city, José said, “I want to see more people, like, to see Lawrence a little different because even the president of the country decided to see us like drug dealers. And let me tell you: you come here like seven in the morning, six in the morning, you see the traffic, so many people that they go to work, they come for work in Lawrence. There’s a lot of good families, they work here. I don’t want to see people pointing to Lawrence like it’s a bad city when it’s not.”

When asked about the squandering of hundreds of

billions of dollars on the military, he said, “If they remodel everything, put more attention to the schools in Lawrence and stuff like that, maybe the town be having like a better reputation.”



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