

Massachusetts: National Grid joins roster of companies risking customers' lives

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On Thursday the National Transportation (NTSB) Safety Board released a preliminary report on the September 13 Columbia Gas disaster in Massachusetts' Merrimack Valley.

Explosions and fires that day killed an 18-year-old man, injured at least 21 people, destroyed five houses, and damaged at least 125 other buildings in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover. Firefighters and other first responders were called in from as far away as Maine.

In yet another incident on October 9, a National Grid scab overpressurized a line in the city of Woburn, 9 miles north of Boston. Gas was shut off to 300 customers to avoid a repeat of the Merrimack Valley disaster, and many had to go without heat and hot water until Thursday. More than 1,000 National Grid workers have been locked out for more than three months.

The NTSB report on the Columbia Gas fires and explosions makes clear that overpressurization of gas lines leading to the blasts and fires was caused by omissions in the engineering documentation provided to a work crew replacing a gas distribution main at the corner of South Union and Salem Streets in Lawrence.

It states: "Columbia Gas developed and approved the work package executed on the day of the accident. The work package did not account for the location of the sensing lines or require their relocation to ensure the regulators were sensing actual system pressure. The work was performed in accordance with steps laid out in the work package."

The regulator stations control gas pressure in the distribution pipes. The system malfunctioned because sensors were left attached to a pipe that had been disconnected, leading to incorrect pressure readings transmitted to the regulators.

Columbia Gas is owned by NiSource. The Merrimack

Valley catastrophe is not the first to be caused by their drive for profits at the expense of infrastructure maintenance. In 2012, for example, a Columbia Gas Transmission pipeline in West Virginia exploded, destroying three houses, propelling a 20-foot section of underground pipe into the air, and burning off 76 million cubic feet of natural gas. The NTSB determined that the "probable cause" of the explosion was external corrosion of a pipe that had not been tested or inspected since 1988.

NiSource has a market capitalization of nearly \$9 billion. Its dividend has nearly doubled from 40 cents per share in 2015 to 78 cents this year. It had revenues of nearly \$5 billion in 2017 and finished the year with \$1 billion in net available liquidity.

NiSource made nearly \$1.4 billion in US profits between 2008 and 2010, but through accounting gimmicks it was able to receive a tax credit of \$227 million during the same period, according to a report by Public Campaign. The company spent more than \$1.8 million on lobbying in those three years.

On Friday, the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities imposed a moratorium on Columbia Gas infrastructure work, aside from emergencies and the replacement of pipes in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover. The company, along with the state government, is claiming that this work will be done by November 19; the moratorium lasts until December 1.

Thousands of people whose homes were damaged on September 13 are being forced to stay in motels until service is restored to their neighborhoods, and Columbia Gas has also filled public parks with trailers for displaced residents. Bakeries and other businesses that depend on natural gas are unable to function, while school children are forced to do their homework in motels miles from their schools.

While a cruise ship is now parked in Boston harbor to house hundreds of workers brought in for the reconstruction, more than 1,200 skilled National Grid gas workers who have been locked out in Massachusetts since the end of June are not being allowed to join the project.

The locked-out workers, whose United Steel Workers (USW) leaders wasted the summer “putting pressure” on Governor Charlie Baker and other politicians to negotiate a settlement, have been documenting the danger posed by National Grid’s scabs. Facebook videos have shown steel road plates being loaded into dump trucks in which they don’t fit, a scab standing on a gas main while hammering on scaffolding in an excavation, and other OSHA violations. At least 29 safety violations have been reported to the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities.

On Friday, USW Locals 12012 and 12003 had their 13th negotiating meeting with National Grid since the lockout began. The struggle is over pensions, health insurance and the paltry raises offered by management. However, WBZ reported that Friday’s meeting focused on safety issues.

Following the October 9 events in Woburn, a National Grid spokeswoman blandly told the press that “while performing routine maintenance on a regulator station in Woburn at approximately 11:30 a.m., a National Grid gas technician inadvertently introduced excess gas into a portion of our system.”

The Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities has now imposed a moratorium on National Grid to prevent it from doing any non-emergency or non-compliance work pending a review of its practices. The moratoria on work by both Columbia Gas and National Grid are an indictment of capitalism, which is incapable of fulfilling basic human needs or maintaining infrastructure.

Nonetheless, environmental groups, including the Conservation Law Foundation and the Environmental League of Massachusetts, are seeking to disguise the problem by arguing that natural gas is an unsafe fuel.

On Saturday the *Boston Globe* carried a front-page article in which “environmental advocates” argue that residents should switch from gas to electric home heating. The president of a nonprofit called the Home Energy Efficiency Team absurdly told the *Globe* that “we’ve seen it’s unwise to pipe in an explosive fuel

into your house and light it on fire, especially in an age of terrorism.”

What is not addressed is that the recent incidents of overpressurization are in the final analysis the result of the subordination of services upon which the public depends to the profits of the gas, electric and other utilities. The lockout of the National Gas workers is also a result of this profit drive.

While there is validity in the *Globe’s* concern that methane from thousands of gas leaks is a significant greenhouse gas, those leaks result from decades of inadequate infrastructure upgrades by for-profit companies and the governments of both big-business parties.

A 2013 report found that not only were trillions of cubic feet of natural gas leaking from more than 91,000 miles of pipes across the US every year, but that customers were paying the gas companies billions of dollars a year for it.



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