

Merrimack Valley disaster, National Grid lockout highlights dangers of profit-driven gas system

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9 November 2018

Autumn has arrived in Massachusetts, with strong winds, chilly days, and nighttime temperatures below freezing. In the Merrimack Valley communities of Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover, thousands of people still do not have gas service in their homes nearly two months after the negligence of Columbia Gas led to an explosion that killed an 18-year-old man, injured dozens and damaged more than 100 buildings.

The September 13 destruction was caused by the over-pressurization of a pipe after the company failed to provide the needed work orders to crews replacing it. A preliminary report from the National Transportation Safety Board found the workers were not to blame.

Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker, who was just reelected, assumed authority in the wake of the disaster and promised residents that gas service would be restored by November 19. Columbia Gas has now delayed the promised date until December 16, and it will likely fail to make good on that.

As of October 30, only 1,400 of the 8,400 metered customers whose gas was shut off after the disaster had their service restored, according to the *Boston Globe*. Nearly 7,000 people were still in alternative housing, such as motels and the temporary trailers that now fill city parks.

Over a dozen officials from the company Baker's administration chose to oversee the restoration efforts—Eversource—donated more than \$12,000 to the Republican governor's re-election campaign after the company was selected, according to state records.

Columbia is also renegeing on its promise to provide new appliances to all homes that were affected. It now plans to cut corners by repairing rather than replacing furnaces, stoves, and water heaters damaged because of its negligence. The working-class neighborhood of South

Lawrence has many old buildings with plumbing that is not up to code, and the company is trying to avoid upgrading it.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke with Julio about conditions on Salem Street in South Lawrence. "Where I live up there you can't even drive up the street right now," he said. "There were multiple explosions. They're ripping out every pipe and putting in new pipes, but it was essentially destroyed."

Julio is able to live at home right now because "we live in newer housing. There are still many older houses that don't have water or electricity. Many people had to leave their homes, and some are in the trailers."

While the federal government squanders trillions on wars and corporate tax cuts, infrastructure has been systematically starved, particularly in cities like Lawrence, a former textile mill town, which have been ravaged by decades of deindustrialization.

"Things are not good here," Julio said. "There's not enough money to fix things. On Salem Street, people still can't go down the street."

On October 27 Columbia Gas held an open house at Lawrence High School for residents who were affected by the disaster. The *Boston Globe* reported many complaints about Columbia's poor communication and planning. The company's "chief restoration" officer responded by saying, "We have let you down, and I apologize." Such apologies are literally cold comfort as winter approaches.

The federal government has empaneled a grand jury and issued subpoenas to Columbia Gas and its parent company, NiSource. The latter's most recent SEC filing shows an operating loss of \$316 million for the quarter ending September 30. However, this figure includes accrued expenses for damage claims, appliance repairs, legal fees, and contractors to help with the restoration.

These costs will be reimbursed by insurance, and the company's stock price did not drop after the operating loss was announced.

Furthermore, Massachusetts law allows utility companies to charge infrastructure costs to customers through rate hikes, and the \$135 million-\$165 million being spent by Columbia Gas on pipe replacements will likely be passed on to already over-charged customers. Columbia and its contractors have replaced 45 miles of old cast iron pipe since the disaster, at a cost of at least \$3 million per mile. According to *USA Today*, in 2017 the company had 471 miles of antiquated cast iron pipes in its US delivery areas.

The state's Department of Public Utilities hired an outside evaluator to review the physical condition of the natural gas infrastructure and other potential dangers. However, the DPU is plagued by a lack of inspectors and will not challenge the profit prerogatives of the private companies that monopolize the industry.

The American Society of Civil Engineers gave US energy infrastructure a D+ rating in 2017, noting that a large percentage of higher pressure gas transmission lines were installed before 1980, even though gas consumption increased by 24 percent between 2005 and 2015. "Periodic failures in existing oil and gas pipelines and quality concerns in new construction point to the need for increased monitoring and maintenance spending," the ASCE report said.

Utility monopolies have little or no incentive to upgrade although they are highly profitable. In other words, without seeing sufficient profit opportunities, the utilities are rolling the dice on near-failing infrastructure, regardless of the devastating human impact. This is the most forceful argument for nationalizing the utility industry and running it as a genuinely public enterprise, free from the relentless demands by Wall Street for ever-higher investor returns.

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There are also serious safety concerns arising from the strikebreaking operations of Boston's other gas monopoly, National Grid. At the end of June, the company, which distributes gas to towns bordering on those destroyed by its competitor, locked out 1,200 skilled workers after they overwhelmingly voted to authorize the United Steelworkers union to call a strike over safety issues, cuts to pay, and health and pension benefits.

After the Merrimack Valley disaster, National Grid officials claimed that customers had nothing to worry

about and that the "system is working normally." But locked-out workers have filed more than 100 safety complaints over the work being done by strikebreakers.

Last month, the DPU ordered National Grid to temporarily suspend all non-essential work except emergency operations following an over-pressurization of a gas line in Woburn leading to the emergency shutdown of gas services to 300 homes. In a statement, the company claimed that management personnel had "inadvertently introduced excess gas into a portion of our system" but quickly recognized and corrected the error.

After National Grid, Columbia Gas, Eversource and the Baker administration initially refused to let locked-out workers participate in the restoration efforts in Merrimack Valley, few workers have been given permission after National Grid released their operator qualifications to the DPU.

The struggle of the National Grid workers has been deliberately isolated by the United Steelworkers union, which has prevented a united struggle by utility workers against deteriorating living standards and safety conditions. The USW, along with the Utility Workers Union, which covers Columbia gas workers, has blocked any unified struggle of gas workers, although whatever concessions are wrenched from National Grid workers will soon be imposed on their brothers and sisters at Columbia.

The unions have blocked mass picketing against the strikebreaking operation and the USW has limited workers to impotent appeals to state and local Democrats, the DPU and the company's wealthy shareholders—all of which have produced nothing.

Workers must break through this isolation by taking the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. This means organizing rank-and-file committees to fight for the broadening of the struggle throughout the Boston area.



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