

Thousands remain homeless after Columbia Gas disaster in Massachusetts

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Some 5,000 people are still unable to return to their homes and are having to survive in hotel rooms and trailers set up in city parks more than two months after the September 13 Columbia Gas explosions in Massachusetts' Merrimack Valley.

An early-season snow storm on November 15 caused pipes in the trailers to freeze, revealing that the drainage pipes carrying dirty "grey water" from sinks and showers mix with the pipes supposedly bringing clean water into the trailers. On Thanksgiving, thousands of people received nothing but boxed dinners, while outdoor temperatures dropped below 15 Fahrenheit (-9 Celsius).

On Monday morning, Democratic US Senator Edward Markey hosted a hearing at a middle school in South Lawrence. Senator Elizabeth Warren, whom Markey called his "partner," New Hampshire Senator Maggie Hassan, US Representatives Nikki Tsongas and Seth Moulton, and Representative-elect Lori Trahan, joined Markey in questioning a panel of state and federal regulators as well as Columbia Gas executives.

The word "tragedy" was thrown around the auditorium by politicians and panel members in an attempt to deny what the September 13 events obviously were: a social crime. Markey and Warren's pretense of holding the executives, Columbia Gas of Massachusetts president Steve Bryant and Joe Hamrock, the president of parent company NiSource, accountable was limited to calling for their resignations and to extracting a vague promise that victims will be "made whole" financially.

Bryant refused to resign, knowing full well the toothless nature of the hearing, while both he and Hamrock said that they might forego their bonuses this year.

Lucianny Rondon, whose 18-year-old brother Leonel

was killed by an exploding house on September 13, gave sincere and tearful testimony. Hamrock, who rakes in \$5 million per year, had the gall to respond that each day he prays "that our Lord might comfort you and bring you his peace." Bryant, whose salary is \$500,000 per year, touted the claims process that has been frustrating residents for the past two and a half months.

Before Thanksgiving, Columbia Gas spokesman Dean Lieberman told the *Boston Herald* that Hamrock, Bryant, and NiSource's "chief restoration officer" would be working on the holiday, but not serving meals. In other words, they put in a public relation showing but could not be bothered to get their hands dirty in the food tents.

On Saturday a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter attempted to visit the trailers that have been set up on O'Connell South Common in Lawrence in order to speak with residents about the conditions they face. A private security guard in an unmarked car refused our reporter entrance using the specious claim that a public park which is housing victims of Columbia Gas' profit-driven crime is "private property." The trailers are surrounded by chain-linked fencing with security at every corner and banks of blinding flood lights towering over them.

At the Monday hearing, Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera said of Columbia Gas: "...break it apart, revoke their license, make them sell their business to someone else ... Columbia Gas should cease to exist. No second chances."

However, the root of the problem is the capitalist profit system itself. More than 1,200 National Grid workers have been locked out in Massachusetts since the end of June, and the scabs employed by the company have committed more than 100 safety

violations, including one in October that led to a gas shutoff for 300 customers.

Executives from Eversource Energy, which provides electric and gas service to parts of Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut, donated more than \$12,000 to the reelection campaign of Republican Governor Charlie Baker this year. Baker declared a state of emergency after the Columbia Gas disaster so that he could direct the Department of Public Utilities to hire Eversource to oversee the clean-up.

Infrastructure safety across the United States is routinely compromised because federal, state, and local politicians are beholden to the same profit motive that drives companies like Columbia Gas. Richard Kuprewicz, president of Accufacts Inc., testified at the Monday hearing that pressure from lobbyists has led to a lack of public input into federal pipeline safety regulations and to a lack of clear, enforceable language. This corruption has been going on since at least 2011, under the Obama administration.

National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Robert Sumwalt also testified at the Monday hearing. On November 14 the NTSB released a Safety Recommendation Report summarizing the inadequacy of the Columbia Gas constructability review prior to beginning the replacement work that led to the September 13 explosions. The report states that “constructability reviews are a recognized and generally accepted good engineering practice ... and are intended to provide an independent and structured review of construction plans and specifications to ensure there are no conflicts, errors, or omissions. The review should be performed by qualified professionals to identify deficiencies and incorporate improvements into the construction documents.”

In the case of the project at South Union and Salem streets in Lawrence, the NTSB found that Columbia Gas’ “constructability review did not identify the impact on pressure regulation and control” because the Meters and Regulation and Land Services departments did not participate.

About four years ago Columbia Gas stopped deploying technicians from its Meter and Regulation department to monitor pressure readings on mains that are being depressurized. The NTSB report found that the absence of such a technician at the project slowed the closing of valves, and “Columbia Gas offered no

explanation” for the procedure. The company had moved the monitoring of pressure to a facility in Ohio and did not have the needed staff at the site.

NiSource’s written response to the NTSB report states that the company will continue using remote monitoring devices.

An inadequately trained field engineer has been singled out as the potential scapegoat for the Merrimack Valley disaster. However, the NTSB says in its report that “interviews of Columbia Gas managers and staff revealed that the company did not conduct separate risk assessments for each construction project.”

In another example of the primacy of cost-cutting over public safety, most states, including Massachusetts, exempt industrial and public utility companies from requiring a Professional Engineer’s seal for projects like the one in Lawrence. The NTSB report insists that “a PE seal on a plan would illustrate that the plan had been approved by an accredited professional with the requisite skills, knowledge, and experience to provide a comprehensive review.”



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