

Newport, Rhode Island: Enbridge natural gas pipeline failure put thousands at risk

By John Marion
5 February 2019

On January 21, with winter temperatures in Newport, Rhode Island at only 11 degrees Fahrenheit (-11 Celsius), a compressor station in Weymouth, Massachusetts owned by energy transportation company Enbridge failed.

The pressure downstream from the compressor dropped so much in two hours that gas had to be shut off to 6,500 houses and businesses in Newport for fear that they would slowly fill with gas after pilot lights went out. There is no redundancy in that part of the system, so gas could not be piped in through an alternate route.

In an insult to the intelligence of all those affected, Enbridge claimed that winter weather had created demand that “exceeded the system’s supply capability.”

Newport joined the list of cities in New England that have been put at risk or damaged because of dilapidated natural gas infrastructure. In September, a buildup of excessive pressure in a gas line owned by Columbia Gas resulted in a series of explosions in Massachusetts Merrimack Valley, killing one person, injuring more than 25 and forcing 30,000 people in three cities to evacuate from their homes.

The *Boston Globe* described the scene in Newport last month: “Thousands of residents without heat and hot water ... queuing for free meals, food vouchers, and space heaters. Displaced families in temporary lodgings while National Guard troops and construction crews secure homes one by one against the threat of explosion.”

The *Globe* interviewed Derek Guenette, a laborer with two young children, who said, “It’s been stressful, man, really stressful. A lot of people in Newport, we can’t afford to just up and leave. I’m living paycheck to paycheck.”

The working class in Newport and nearby Middletown struggle to get by in the shadows of the ruling elite’s mansions and yachts. According to Data USA, published by Deloitte, 9.2 percent of people Newport County live below the poverty line. Seventy-five percent of workers had wages under \$80,000 in 2016; healthcare, educational services, and retail are the three biggest job sectors. Median yearly earnings for utilities workers was little more than \$60,000 in 2013, while the median for education workers was less than \$50,000.

After the January 21 crisis Newport’s public schools closed for the week and Salve Regina University, which graduates approximately 80 nursing students per year, was forced to cancel classes. Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo, a Democrat and former hedge fund manager, declared a state of emergency for Newport County.

Two years ago, a frozen valve at the same Weymouth station caused more than 200,000 cubic feet of natural gas to be spewed into the air. Since Enbridge had no monitors on the valve the leak was not found until after residents complained about the smell.

Enbridge had adjusted earnings of more than \$900 million after interest, capital depreciation, and corporate taxes were netted out in the third quarter of 2018. This amount was up from \$765 million for the same quarter in 2017. Enbridge’s “cash derived from operating activities” was around \$1.5 billion per quarter.

The company sucks in these huge amounts of money by refusing to spend money on equipment maintenance and by using eminent domain seizures to run roughshod over people’s homes, farms and yards.

In July 2010 a 6-foot rupture in an Enbridge pipeline in Marshall, Michigan, spilled more than 1 million

gallons of diluted bitumen into the Talmadge Creek and the Kalamazoo River over a period of 17 hours. Twenty-five miles of the river were polluted before the spill was contained. The polyethylene tape used to coat the failed section of pipe had not been replaced since 1969 and the pipe itself had corroded as a result.

Bitumen, derived from tar sands in this case, is diluted with toxic chemicals like naphtha before being moved through pipelines. The oil spilled into the Kalamazoo also contained nickel, beryllium, molybdenum and other heavy metals.

The river could not be reopened for recreation until two years after the spill, and the US Environmental Protection Agency took six years to issue a consent decree with a \$61 million fine on the company. Enbridge also promised the EPA that it would spend \$110 million—less than 15 percent of its quarterly earnings—on cracks and corrosion in its pipes. In May 2018 the EPA fined Enbridge a paltry \$1.8 million for failing to keep this promise.

Nonetheless, Enbridge has worked with judges and legislatures to impose eminent domain seizures in areas where it is replacing pipeline. WLNS in Michigan reported on a 2012 case in which Enbridge crews showed up on a woman's property without permission and cut down trees in order to install a third pipeline across her land. The company refused to provide her an end date for the work.

“What am I going to leave my daughter? As wonderful as [our] house is, who's going to want to buy a house that's got three pipelines on it with tar sands running through it? It's so highly corrosive and dangerous,” the woman told WLNS.

In November 2017 the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* reported that Enbridge “has a history in Wisconsin of rolling over reluctant landowners' wishes by turning to the government to allow it to claim private land through eminent domain.”

In one case, Enbridge ran a pipe for highly inflammable diluent next to a family's house, and then provided them with a “safety” kit to use if the diluent leaked out of the pipe. The kit included a glow stick for emergency lighting because flipping a light switch would ignite the chemicals, and instructions to run upwind because starting a car could also cause an explosion.

After turning down multiple payment offers for an

easement across their farmland, another family told Enbridge to route its pipe around their land. A corporate executive responded, “We are Enbridge. We don't go around anything. We go through it.”

The company's political collaborators are bipartisan: Obama's EPA wrote the unenforced consent decree in Michigan, while in Wisconsin the Republican state legislature added a policy rider to a budget bill to change the wording of the state law governing the Public Service Commission's condemnation authority for eminent domain cases.

While the law already allowed for-profit oil pipeline companies to take land under the guise of providing a public service, the 2015 legal change substituted the term “business entity” for corporation. This change was demanded by Enbridge lobbyists because the company is a Limited Liability Partnership, a status often used by companies to lower their business taxes and protect against lawsuits.

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