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Struggle against Shell in Ireland continues as public hearing gets underway

Andrew Flood

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The decade long struggle against the construction of an experimental raw gas pipeline by Shell as part of its Corrib gas project continued in the west of Ireland with further direct actions against the project and the opening of a public hearing by the planning authority on the latest phase of Shell's plan. Meanwhile the Irish government continues to give away hundreds of billions of oil & gas reserves to corporations. These two reports published on the WSM site this week explain the latest developments.

Earlier this week the government announced its intention to give away the last exploration blocks in the Irish sea to private corporations under its "open door" policy. Today in Erris Shell starts the latest round of its long attempt to impose an experimental raw gas pipeline on the community, back from its defeat early in the new year when the long running community protests forced An Bord Pleanála to block the original ludicrous route for the pipeline that took it through the village

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of Rossport. Meanwhile the community continue to resist Shell with borehole drilling being stopped for three hours on Monday as protesters evaded security at low tide.

The Shell monitoring website, royaldutchshellplc.com, posted a letter last week on the Corrib gas project by “a former Shell employee in Ireland” which reveals that Shell “seem to have treated the Irish like just another third world country. They corrupt the government, try to steal the resources, pay no taxes, and treat the people like crap. Shell is making no friends amongst the Irish and I suppose they don’t care as long as they can manipulate (buy off?) the government...the State of Alaska gets up to a 20% royalty on oil and gas produced from State lands. That is ‘off the top’, not after expenses, return of invested capital, etc. That royalty did NOT stop development of Prudhoe Bay, nor will it stop development of the gas reserves in Alaska. The State of Alaska has benefited immensely from the oil royalty revenues... It seems to me that the Irish government should be able to collect a similar ‘off the top’ royalty from the Corrib gas. I seriously doubt that it would stop development of those reserves. Shell would squeal like a stuck pig, but so what. The Irish government need only look to Norway to see what responsible management of their country’s natural resources could do for them.”

The An Bord Pleanála decision in the new year that halted Shell in its tracks came as a surprise to many who assumed that given the governments unconditional and often violent backing of Shell no element of the state would dare to point out the obvious, that the pipeline was dangerous. Shell’s new plan to run it through a tunnel under the bay and to drop the pressure does represent a partial victory for the local campaign but although this new route is somewhat less dangerous it does not address all the safety concerns. Houses at the landfall at Glengad will still be well within the kill zone of a pipeline failure and residents of Rossport will still have to drive over the pipeline as they enter and leave the area. Some residents have been forced

to become exports on the oil & gas industry in order to understand the unstated dangers of each stage of the project, it is quite likely that they will reveal flaws in the tunnel project as the hearing unfolds.

In addition the tunnel does nothing to address the environmental concerns around the pollution of the only supply of drinkable water for the entire area at Carrowmore lake. Pollution from the construction of the refinery at Bellanaboy has already been recorded entering the watershed of the lake by Shell to Sea campaigners. Emissions from the refinery will pollute the air and be released into Broadhaven bay, in particular if these emissions exceed permitted limits (an all too common occurrence with refineries internationally) this may have severe repercussions for human health and the fishing and tourism industries that many local people depend on. Local fisherman Pat O'Donnell who has resisted the project has had one of his boats sunk under him by armed and masked men in the dead of night and has been jailed on three occasions, two of these without charge at key moments when Shell needed to have him removed from the area for pipe laying operations.

The new oral hearing is scheduled to run until the 9th September Forty nine submissions have been submitted on behalf of 320 residents. Resistance is also continuing outside the hearing, On indymedia.ie Jen Debender of the Rossport Solidarity Camp reported that yesterday "a group of about 15 people managed to get past the 20 or so IRMS Security guarding the platform. The group formed a circle around the drill and stayed until the gardai arrived on scene and used Section 8 and a little bit of force to get people out from under the drill. One person had locked themselves onto the drill with a chain, but eventually they were removed by the gardai as well. However work still did not resume because people continued to dash back under the platform for the next couple of hours, often without much resistance from IRMS or the gardai. The gardai did use pressure points and some arm twisting to get

two campaigners off of one of the drills at one stage, but no one had any lasting pain or injury.”

Meanwhile ongoing local monitoring and pressure has forced the Department of the Environment to send a senior engineer to the area to investigate breaches of the foreshore license for Shell’s drilling of boreholes in the Sruwaddacon estuary special area of conservation. In the last weeks there have been many arrests of people protesting the drilling, again repeating the pattern where the state suppresses protests even as it becomes clear that the protesters objections to the processes are correct.

Oil & Gas companies stand to make hundreds of billions of euro from exploitation of oil & gas fields around Ireland under conditions where the Irish state will hardly receive a cent. The new regime introduced by Minister Ray Burke (subsequently jailed for corruption) means that the cut of profits going to the Irish state will be the second lowest in the world. Given the huge profits that stand to be made it is perhaps not surprising that attempts to suppress protests at Rossport have seen all sorts of dirty tricks as well as the deployment of hundreds of police, secret police, the Navy and the airforce in the service of Shell. But as the latest arrests show ten years into their struggle the local community refuses to be defeated.