Marcellus Shale Update: The Lawrence, MA Pipeline Explosions

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On January 11, 1912, women weavers shut down the Everett Mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Earlier that day, they opened their pay envelopes to find their wages cut by 4%.

A recently enacted Massachusetts law had reduced the workweek for women and children from 56 hours to 54. Mill owners reacted by cutting the pay of their already lowly-paid workers. The women revolted.

The strike soon engulfed the city. Workers slashed machine belts, threads and cloth. Mill owners hired strike breakers and militiamen. That only ratcheted up the tension.

Known in history as the "Bread and Roses Strike", the bitter work stoppage lasted nine weeks. When it was over, Congressional hearings had galvanized the public against the working conditions allowed by the owners, and the workers gained a 15% pay raise. The political earthquake would be one of the seminal moments of the American labor movement.

A century later, a more literal earthquake in Lawrence, Massachusetts may portend a seminal movement for the natural gas industry.

Just three days after a gas pipeline exploded in Western Pennsylvania, at least 70 explosions tore through a Columbia Gas pipeline in Lawrence. Fires broke out throughout the city. One person is dead, at least twelve are injured, and 60-100 homes burned. A large geographic area around Lawrence has been evacuated.

It is far too early to tell what caused the explosions, but certain things are clear.

First, our national infrastructure is deplorable. Decades of disinvestment leave us with power lines, electrical grids, roads, airports and bridges that would embarrass a third world country. The nation is falling apart.

Second, it is the responsibility of the owners of natural gas pipelines to ensure their safety. That means adequately maintaining lines that already exist, properly building new pipelines, and informing the authorities when pipelines begin to decay or show damage.

Third, pipelines carrying pressurized gas are inherently dangerous. To deny that is to deny reality. It is up to the owners of the pipelines to show that they are safe, and not up to the public to show they are not.

Fourth, "renewable energy" will not solve this transmission problem. Solar and wind power can create electricity, but it takes high-tension lines to transmit it. To those who propose offshore solar and wind as a major source of the nation's power, imagine the situation in the Carolinas right now if they obtained a significant amount of their power through offshore solar and wind farms transmitted by high-tension lines. Even inland, think about the aftermath of Hurricane Florence in a "renewable energy' world. How many of those solar and wind installations would survive intact, and what would be the result of the storm on the transmission lines? For how long would the area be unlivable?

Fifth, given modern political realities, the natural gas industry in the Northeast could be in serious trouble. It must get a handle on its pipeline situation. Andrew Cuomo defeated Cynthia Nixon in the New York Gubernatorial primary, but Nixon pushed Cuomo even further to the left than before. With two pipelines blowing up in four days, what chance does the industry have of convincing the public or political leaders that natural gas pipelines are a good idea?

For the last decade, gas industry workers have produced an energy revolution in the Marcellus Region. Whole parts of Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia that faced economic depression have been revitalized; the grip on our economic lifeline of tyrannical regimes in the Middle East, Africa, South America and Russia has been broken. American consumers throughout the country have saved tens of billions in energy costs.

All of that will be at risk if the gas industry doesn't get serious about policing its own. The boards of directors of our major gas producers should think about the tens of billions of dollars in investment they've made in our region. Are they prepared to see it vanish because they refused to hold the pipeline companies to the highest standards of construction and maintenance? If they abdicate their responsibility at this most delicate moment, they will have only themselves to blame.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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