

Hunger strike and arrests in Erris as *Solitaire* arrives

The world's largest pipe-laying vessel, the *Solitaire*, arrived off the coast of Co. Mayo yesterday evening. The *Solitaire* is installing the offshore section of the Corrib gas pipeline for Shell.

The ship is supported by a number of Shell support craft, the Garda Síochána Underwater Unit, and part of the Naval Service. Stiff opposition has begun, with a local schoolteacher already on hunger strike. Hundreds of gardaí are in the area, and the main road to the beach has been closed. Local people have been alarmed to see so many police, and sinister figures in green rainjackets, who may be police (although the Garda Síochána usually wear blue) or could be Shell security, or even members of the army. Internet access in the area near the Shell compound has been cut off, and the main road to the beach has been blocked.

Opposition to the pipe-laying operation consists of a number of environmental and political activists based in the Solidarity Camp, local fishermen who are worried about contamination of the waters they depend on, and many local people who are concerned that the offshore section of the Shell scheme is being built while no planning permission exists for the onshore section.

A local school principal, Maura Harrington, has vowed to refuse food until the ship leaves the area. She has parked her car in front of the Shell compound. Fishermen from nearby Porturlin who refused to move their crab gear from the path of the *Solitaire* were arrested last night, and a large group of local people protested at the Garda station in Belmullet. They were released at midnight, went fishing this morning, and were immediately arrested again. Gardaí are threatening to detain anyone on any craft that approaches the path of the *Solitaire*.

Protesters are engaged in a series of actions designed to slow the project. In 2005 a number of local people were jailed for 94 days for opposing the Shell project as it was then configured. Since then the project has been dogged by controversy, with many arrests, court cases, injuries, complaints to the Garda Complaints Board and Ombudsman, and political activity both in and outside the Dáil. In recent weeks there have been twenty-nine separate arrests in the area around Glengad beach, where the pipeline is due to make landfall.

Shell spokespersons have claimed that the project has not been affected by the protests; they say that recent delays to the project have been caused by severe weather. Some newspapers have claimed that the project, which is being carried out by a consortium of companies, including Statoil of Norway and Marathon Oil of Texas, will benefit the country, even though all the natural gas will belong to the Corrib partners,

and no royalty will be charged. There is no contractual obligation on Shell, the scheme's principal shareholder and operator, to sell any of the gas to Bord Gáis Éireann, and so the resource will be sold to the highest bidder. An Bord Gáis has confirmed that there will be no financial benefit to Irish consumers from the Corrib gas field.

Environmentalists have warned that the onshore section of the scheme, which includes a huge refinery being constructed six miles inland at Bellanaboy, will be expanded and used to process gas from other fields off the west coast in the future. They also say that Shell will use the precedent of an onshore refinery to strong-arm its way into installing similar schemes in other places around the world.

A production pipeline passing through a residential area is unprecedented. Political campaigners point out that the terms under which Irish resources have been handed over to the oil companies mean that there are no benefits for the people of Ireland. The Government, including Green Party ministers at the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources, has backed Shell's scheme.

Last month the Garda Síochána issued figures showing that €11 million had been spent policing the project since 2006—more than half the amount the force spent on fighting organised crime.

Activists in Co. Mayo have asked for assistance. Those not in a position to travel to Co. Mayo can hold solidarity protests (this article could be used as the basis for leaflets) at the Irish embassy or Shell petrol stations. Local politicians should be approached to put pressure on the Government to suspend work on the offshore pipeline, at least until permission is granted for the onshore section. In Britain, Green Party politicians who may have some influence with their counterparts in the Irish Green Party should be contacted.

For more info see indymedia.ie/mayo or corribsos.com.