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Protests at Shell HQ against jailing of fisherman Pat O'Donnell

Andrew Flood

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Over 50 Shell to Sea campaigners gathered at the Shell head quarters in Leeson street Dublin Tuesday evening to protest at the jailing of 52 year old Erris fisherman Pat O'Donnell for resisting Shell's experimental gas pipeline. Pat received a seven month sentence which has the added benefit for Shell of taking his boat off of Broadhaven Bay for the period they need to carry out major underwater construction work and repairs. Pat has twice previously been arrested and held without charge when Shell has needed to carry out work in the bay.

There has been a long running struggle in Erris, an isolated and impoverished area of rural Ireland, for most of the last decade. Shell have been attempting to impose an experimental gas pipeline on the local community many of whose houses lie within the blast radius that would result in the event of a pipeline failure. As well as the issue of pipeline safety the Shell to Sea campaign is also demanding an end to the Great Oil and Gas Giveaway under which

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Shell and other corporations are been given the oil & gas reserves found around Ireland (minimum value 420 billion) without paying any royalties. The last five years in particular have seen many protests where residents, supported by others who have travelled to the area to show solidarity, have attempted to block construction or dismantle the frequently illegal structures that have been erected. The Irish state has reacted with waves of violence and then arrests and a massive deployment of security forces that has seen over 21 million euro wasted and at its peak seen up to 700 personnel from the police, Navy, airfare and private security forces deployed against the local community. Workers Solidarity Movement members have been consistently involved alongside others with solidarity work in this struggle both locally and elsewhere in Ireland.

Pat O'Donnell was well known to all of us and all those who have visited the camp as he has spent much time explaining the issues to visitors to the area. Dublin Shell to Sea spokesperson Caoimhe Kerins said: *"Pat O'Donnell is a well respected and popular local fisherman in Mayo. He is known to all in the community and everyone is deeply upset by his imprisonment and the smears against his character for his opposition to the Corrib Gas Project in its current form. Pat O'Donnell is a gentleman who is neither a 'bully' nor a 'thug'. He is standing up his and his community's rights and has been criminalised and vilified for doing so. It is unacceptable that Shell to Sea campaigners are being criminalised for their opposition to the Corrib Gas Project. The law is being applied in an extremely selective manner in Mayo. Thirty local people were hauled up in front of the courts last week alone all on minor charges."*

Terence Conway, a resident of the area and Shell to Sea spokesperson, said in response to the sentence *"the jailing of Pat O'Donnell shows selective prosecution on behalf of the Gardaí. Pat O'Donnell was picked out of a crowd of 60 people. The sentences are totally disproportionate to any alleged law-breaking and seem to be a punishment for opposing the Governments' facilitation of Shell."*

Pat O'Donnell has been a constant thorn in Shell's side as he has refused to be bought off, and has upheld his legal and traditional right to fish in Broadhaven Bay. Now, as Shell prepare to occupy Broadhaven Bay in the coming months for further pipeline work, Pat O'Donnell is conveniently stuck in jail."

Whenever Shell have needed to carry out construction work in the bay Pat has been removed from the scene. In the summer of 2008 and 2009 this mean his arrest while fishing on the bay and his detention without charge until pieces of work had been done. More sinisterly on 11 June 2009 Pat's boat was sunk by 4 armed and masked men who boarded it while he fished at night in the bay shortly after it emerged that several men who had worked as security at the Shell compound the previous summer had been involved in an attempt to start a civil war in Bolivia. (see The Shadow over Erris).

The jailing of Pat and the sentencing of several other Shell to Sea campaigners comes in the aftermath of An Bord Pleanála vindicating the opposition of the local community to the experimental gas pipeline when it found in November that up to half of Shell's proposed onshore pipeline route was *"unacceptable"* on safety grounds. Even mainstream journalists have acknowledged that this finding means *"members of the local community didn't just have a right to protest. They had a duty to do so."* (Fintan O'Toole, Irish Times, Feb 16). Shell in the meantime are pushing ahead with the construction project with the fullbacking of the Irish state including the 'Green' Party. The Green Party in opposition took part in protests against the experimental pipeline, once in government the same people declared it safe!