

# A Defeat for Frackers

BY

LIZA FEATHERSTONE

Hunger strikers in New York chalked up a win this week when Governor Andrew Cuomo rejected a gas pipeline off the coast of Long Island.

Outside New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's midtown Manhattan office this week, a man expressed concern about six women who weren't getting enough to eat. He wasn't too interested in hearing why, though, and after a few minutes of remonstrance he hurried on. Other bystanders were more open-minded. They asked questions. Most didn't know much about the problem, but some wanted to learn more.

The six women, all part of the Stop the Williams Pipeline Coalition, were fasting in protest, demanding that Cuomo deny a water permit for a proposed pipeline in New York Bay, off the coast of the Rockaways, to be built by the Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Williams Company. The



women's action was the latest in long-running grassroots struggle in New York State — and worldwide — against fracked gas and its infrastructure. It was also yet another sign that the global movement to address the climate crisis is getting increasingly serious and confrontational.

One of the hunger strikers, Joan Flynn, seventy-one, lives in the Rockaways, a peninsula that forms part of southern Queens. She knows firsthand what a difference good policy can make. Since the 1972 expansion of the Clean Water Act, she explains, the Atlantic Ocean has been much cleaner. Without municipal waste, PCBs, or Agent Orange, the saltwater ecosystems around New York City have been gradually recovering for years. In the last decade, “the marine life has had a chance to come back, in just remarkable ways,” she said. “We see whales!” Flynn’s face lights up. About two years ago, she recalls leaving the beach, her back to the ocean. “I was at the top of the dune, and I heard a collective ‘ohhhh’ from all the people on the beach, and there was the whale.” She motioned with her hand, to illustrate the dramatic sight of that fluke.



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Joan Flynn, seventy-one, lives in the Rockaways.  
Erik McGregor



“We have seals. We have dolphins,” she continues, smiling in wonderment. “They’ve just jumping in the waves! It’s amazing, there they are, no further than that car,” she gestures out to Third Avenue. “I’m sitting in my beach chair — that beach chair right there,” she laughs, pointing to her hunger strike setup on the sidewalk. “The Kemp’s Ridley turtle, which is endangered, came and nested on the beach toward Breezy Point. All of this magnificence.”

“It’s been really, really wonderful to finally see the ocean with all its life,” Flynn exults. “And this pipeline, if it were to be built, would destroy much of that life.”

Besides its flora and fauna, the Rockaways are also home to a working-class human community, one that is deeply in love with the ocean. These people’s homes and economic security were already badly battered by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. “If the pipeline were to be built and the toxic chemical-filled sludge from the bottom of the ocean that we know is there, is disturbed,” Flynn explains, that sludge “will be in the water that we swim in, that our children swim in, that our children play in.”

“They have no right to take the ocean from us,” Flynn fumes. “They have no right to say that it’s okay to poison the water for humans and animals. It’s unacceptable.”

As we stand talking amid the Midtown skyscrapers and honking traffic, the water and plants that sustain life on earth feel far away. But like Joan Flynn, Illiana Walsingham-Johnson, twenty-one, a rising senior at NYU, has lived in a place where the intertwined fate of humans and their natural environment is easier to see. Walsingham-Johnson is from Florida; many in her family lost their homes to Hurricane Michael. An environmental studies major, she has been active in student efforts to get NYU to decarbonize its investments. But she’s recently been taking more radical steps. She just got arrested with Sunrise, the climate movement organization, in front of Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer’s office. “A lot of us are realizing, if we don’t do something we’re going to die painfully,” she says.



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Iliana Walsingham-Johnson, twenty-one, a rising senior at NYU.  
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Lee Ziesche feels that urgency, too. Ziesche, who now works with the Sane Energy Project, an anti-fracking group, explained that she just turned thirty and realized she'd been fighting fracking for six years. "I needed to take an escalated step," she said. "People keep getting harmed and the climate keeps getting harmed. I'm just at that point where I need to do more."

She realizes she's not alone. Says Ziesche, "The IPCC report said twelve years, which is now eleven. People feel that clock ticking now." The report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has focused a scorching spotlight on the political class, "especially Democrats, who for years have been calling out Republicans for being climate denialists but here they are supporting fracked gas."

Despite having banned fracking in New York — a victory for grassroots activists, including several of the women camping out in front of his office this week — Cuomo has approved several other pipelines throughout the state. (The fracking itself takes place in Pennsylvania, exposing a yawning loophole in Cuomo's supposed "ban.") The Williams Company donated to his gubernatorial campaign. Several of Cuomo's close



associates are deeply intertwined with the fracked gas industry; one of his campaign managers even went to prison for such intimacies, while another has worked as a lobbyist for the industry, specifically specializing in pipelines.

Ziesche worked on Barack Obama's reelection campaign, in western Pennsylvania, in 2012 "because I still had faith in Barack Obama." But she recalls him later sitting on a stage with Leonardo DiCaprio after the screening of a climate change documentary. Obama said, "people have feelings about fracking." Ziesche was incensed. "This is based on science! This is based on meeting people who are impacted. How dare you minimize our opposition to this into something that is just about 'feelings' because you want to keep taking money from the oil and gas industry?"

"That's why people are in the streets," she says, describing the sense that our leaders are just pretending to address this problem, while actually working overtime to protect "the rich white dudes at the top."

Another hunger striker, Monica Hunken, thirty-seven, knows all too well how the system works to protect capitalists. Ten years ago, while working on a documentary about gas, she moved from documentarian to activist. It happened, she says, when "I learned that one of the heavy metals released in fracking is the same one that killed my father." An engineer, he was exposed on the job, she says, "and [his company] basically let him die, because of profit. He took them to court." Her family lost their lawsuit. Her father died in the middle of the trial. "I learned how corporate greed is the most powerful thing we have to battle in the world," Hunken says, "and it's the thing that continues propelling us towards death."

Yesterday evening, that death drive came to an at-least-momentary halt. The women got some good news. The New York State Department of Conservation rejected Williams's bid for a water permit for the Rockaways pipeline. A few hours earlier, Representatives Jerry Nadler, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Nydia Valázquez, José Serrano, and seven other New York members of Congress had signed a letter to Cuomo denouncing the project.

The state's rejection of the pipeline was a triumph for the grassroots movement against fracking. But it was only a partial victory, since the state's rejection ("without prejudice") was worded in such a way that Williams can apply again. The company dismissed the state's concerns



about dangerous chemical pollution in the waterways as a “technicality.”



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New Yorkers started a three-day Climate Hunger Strike outside Governor Cuomo’s midtown Manhattan office on May 14, 2019. Erik McGregor



Lee Ziesche, reached this morning, said, “Obviously it’s not just a technical issue. We think they’re just saying that so their investors won’t worry.” She cautioned against the dangers of relaxed public scrutiny on the project. “We’ve seen this before, where everyone declares victory, all the nonprofits fundraise off it, then the movement dies down.” Once out of sight, she warns, “we’ve seen other pipelines come back from the dead.”

“We should definitely celebrate,” Ziesche said. “We don’t think this would have happened without people power. But it’s not over.”

#### CONTRIBUTORS

Liza Featherstone is a columnist for *Jacobin*, a freelance journalist, and the author of *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers’ Rights at Wal-Mart*.

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