

Senate Committee on Energy, Utilities and Communications
Senate Committee on Public Safety
Joint Informational Hearing
The San Bruno Explosion: Pipeline Safety in California

TESTIMONY of JERRY ACOSTA, Senior Representative for Region V
Utility Workers Union of America

Chairman Padilla, Chairman Leno, members of the Senate Committees on Energy and Public Safety and members of the State Assembly.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you in this important meeting to survey the safety and reliability of the system for delivering natural gas service in California -- one of the essential features of our public economic infrastructure.

I am Jerry Acosta, Senior Representative for Region V of the Utility Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO. I want to acknowledge UWUA Local 132 President Arturo Frias who is in the audience today. I represent all of the locals at the Southern California Gas that includes Customer Service, Distribution, Transmissions, Professional & Technical workers. I am formerly the Western Regional Director for the National AFL-CIO, former Vice President of the L.A. County Federation Labor, a former member of the California State Federation Strategic Planning Committee which created work plans for all the California Central Labor Councils.

However, the Job I am most proud was when I was a Service Representative for the Southern California Gas Company working in South Central, South East Los Angeles, Watts and Compton.

I am here to provide you with policy perspectives on gas system safety from the members of the UWUA who work at the Southern California Gas Company. Gas workers have a unique, close range vantage point on safety issues. Their concrete knowledge and experience with the facilities and systems that are actually used to provide gas service, along with their technical skills and expertise, are invaluable assets for the public.

The members of the UWUA are committed to safety and service. I would like to quote an excerpt from our union's Constitution:

The Utility Workers Union of America, AFL-CIO is an organization of members united by the belief in the dignity and worth of workers and by an understanding of the necessity and value of the services we provide to the public for their health and well-being. ... We commit to...protect the interests of consumers and the public (including our members) in reliable, safe and environmentally sound utilities at affordable, just and reasonable costs.”

I want to give you two broad policy recommendations going forward:

First, California should explicitly adopt, by statute, a “Safety First” policy for operation and maintenance of the system for delivering natural gas to our residents and businesses. Placing a priority on safety will provide

guidance when engineering and professional judgments about trade-offs between cost and safety are decided. Rather than working to meet minimum compliance with federal rules, we should recognize that accident prevention through scheduled maintenance, shortened inspection intervals, and equipment replacements and upgrades within, rather than beyond, the designed life of the facilities, is in the public interest. For example, over one-third of the pressure regulator stations on the SoCal Gas system are over 35 years old, the average life expectancy of such equipment. SoCal's current replacement schedule will take almost 30 years to replace these already aged facilities.

A statutory "Safety First" policy is not inconsistent with federal law and provides guidance for regulation of our gas utilities, who are "public utilities subject to the control of the Legislature" under the California Constitution. As a necessary complement to the articulation of the policy, we need a collaborative program involving workers and their unions and utilities to identify safety problems and address them through research and training programs in which workers and their unions are full participants.

Second, California should improve response to reports of gas leaks and other safety-related concerns by explicitly adopting (1) minimum standards for response times to customer reports and inquiries about potential leaks, and (2) standards for customer service that shorten response times for hook-ups, turn-ons, conservation and weatherization recommendations, reconnections, appliance adjustments and in-door air quality checks especially for carbon monoxide. This could include a new 7-1-1 number for reporting gas leaks and other hazard concerns; it could include a review of

the operation of the statutory “One-call, 8-1-1 system” for reducing the incidence of excavation-related accidents.

The issue of improved customer response is especially crucial.

In a recent natural gas explosion blast that killed two at a South LA welding shop, reports suggest that Southern California Gas was unable to schedule a reconnect to this small business for some five days. A desperate customer, who was out of business as a result, took matters into his own hands by trying to connect his own service, with tragic fatal consequences.

Let me be clear -- this accident was the direct result of a customer building an illegal bypass. However, restoring service for customers used to be a priority for the Gas Company – it was same-day service, especially for small businesses that would be out of business without gas. This tragedy is not surprising in the middle of the worst recession in living memory; with a lack of good jobs in our communities people become desperate.

Our members are telling us that downgrading of service and a slower response to the needs our customers has become more frequent. It takes longer to get a live voice on the phone and when you do, Gas Company policy forces our members to make you wait up to 5 to 10 days to get your gas turned on, depending on your location. Currently, there are simply not enough workers either in the call centers or in the field to maintain safe and effective service, especially in poorer areas where most consumers are people of color and cannot afford alternatives.

The Legislature should adopt these policy directives placing a priority on safety and providing for prompt customer service and safety response, delegating to the CPUC the responsibility for implementing them.

I want to emphasize that both of these recommendations have implications for employment and job creation in the gas industry. We should develop and promote a safety-conscious environment in the industry, that includes full and co-equal participation of employees and management in proactively identifying and addressing safety issues both in the workplace and in the community, and assures that the public receives safe, high quality gas service.

My colleague former CPUC Commissioner Carl Wood will address issues about how regulators have developed and can continue to develop procedures that enable utilities to remain accountable to the public for the costs of addressing safety and operational concerns. Thank you.