Pipeline protesters Willie and Mary Corduff on the quay at Rossport, County Mayo. Willie Corduff spent time in prison in 2005 for his activities in opposing the pipeline. Photograph by Murdo MacLeod for the Observer.
Strange tale of Shell's pipeline battle, the Garda and £30,000 of booze

Shell's Corrib gas project has been delayed for years by Irish protesters. Now claims have emerged of corporate sweeteners for local residents — and the police. Ed Vulliamy reports

For 10 years, the Shell oil and gas behemoth has endeavoured to bring ashore a pipeline from the Atlantic into the heart-stopping beauty of Ireland's County Mayo seaboard. And for 10 years, local people whose ancestors farmed the land and fished the ocean have been determined to stop it.

The struggle has become an epic clash between the Goliath that is Shell, backed by the Irish police, and a group assembled around the umbrella protest group Shell to Sea, whose founder, retired primary schoolteacher Maura Harrington, says that, “thanks in no small measure to the Shell to Sea campaign, the project is 10 years behind schedule and its budget has trebled”.

An internationally award-winning film, The Pipe, directed by Risteard O'Donnainh, has vividly charted the confrontation on the little rural strands; farmers and fishermen beaten and jailed; riot police and balaclava-clad guards mobilised across little lanes winding through bog to the brine.

But beyond these surreal scenes, a stranger battle rages as Shell struggles for the “hearts and minds” of the community, using what the senior press officer for the company in Ireland, John Egan, calls “accommodation services” — sweeteners, or “donations”, to the people of the region.

The campaign to win the residents' goodwill has sometimes displayed dashes of Whisky Galore-style farce — shower facilities for the local football team and surfers. But it has also become a morality play of sorts, shedding much light on how the cogs of big corporates turn in a remote rural community.

And the “accommodation services” have become the focus of a bitter dispute between Shell and a tiny oil services company, OSSL, which claims that it was charged with “greasing the palms” of interested parties on County Mayo's coastline. The company, managed by Desmond Kane from Glasgow and Neil Rooney from Belfast, insists that the services it carried out for Shell even ran to providing the police force with alcohol soon after a major clash with protesters — along with other outlandish favours to residents.

More sinisterly, OSSL also claims that a Shell manager demanded that Rooney withhold evidence after the clash, which occurred at Pollathomais in 2007. Rooney says that he heard an officer say of the pipeline protesters, “drive them into the sea”, but was told that this “cannot be part of your statement” to an ombudsman because the officer concerned was “our man” and “had to be protected at all costs”.

OSSL's allegations come in the wake of a recent report by a special rapporteur for the United Nations which found “excessive and disproportionate use of force against protesters” peacefully opposing the pipeline.

Rapporteur Margaret Sekagya said that she “received credible reports and evidence — indicating the existence of a pattern of intimidation, harassment, surveillance and criminalisation of those peacefully opposing the Corrib gas project ... Moreover,” she reported, “there have been serious concerns about the lawfulness of certain actions of the private security firm employed by Shell.”

The rapporteur “expresses her concern at ... shortcomings in official investigations, particularly those relating to the use of excessive force and abusive behaviour by the police”.

OSSL had served Shell since the oil giant took over the Corrib pipeline in 2002, and had been contracted onsite to Shell's predecessor, Enterprise Oil.

Kane and Rooney describe having “to provide whatever’s needed, whatever time of day or night. If they needed 100 fireproof gloves at 11pm, it was our job to get them. We did a good job, Enterprise told us they’d never seen such service in Aberdeen, and Shell kept us to carry on that level of service”.

But the “accommodation services” went too far for OSSL. It was tasked to provide “a tennis court, cookers, television sets, agricultural equipment, school fees, home improvements, garden centre visits, forestry equipment”, says Rooney — for local residents. He says that he and Kane found themselves paying workmen to do one thing, then invoicing Shell for something else, and often administering “accommodation services” themselves.

The pattern was the same as the saga reached its reported nadir; the delivery, from Northern Ireland in an unmarked van, of alcohol worth €35,000 (£30,100) to the Garda station at Belmullet, where the police force and a large consignment of alcohol went too far for OSSL. It was tasked to register the grievance with his successor to the Garda Siochana on behalf of Shell.

Gilligan was transferred to become a press officer at the Garda Siochana headquarters in Dublin, where he continued to correspond with Kane, telling him to register the grievance with his successor at Belmullet.

And the “accommodation services” themselves.

The pipe, the police operation was quartered at Christmas, 2007. Kane quotes a Supt John Gilligan as saying, while he was helping to unload the consignment of booze, “it’s lucky these walls are so high, lest the protesters caught a glimpse of what was going on.

Arguments eventually developed over invoicing the “accommodation services”, with Shell allegedly asking that another contractor be invoiced instead of the oil giant directly.