

Oil spill from BP explosion spreads in Gulf of Mexico

Tom Eley
29 April 2010

An oil spill caused by last week's deadly explosion on a British Petroleum (BP) oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico is spreading toward the coast of Louisiana, threatening fisheries, beaches and numerous species.

The April 20 explosion on the BP-contracted rig, Deepwater Horizon, took the lives of 11 workers and critically injured four more. It was caused by a blowback when a mud sealant applied to the drill hole on the seabed likely failed to seal. Oil then forced its way up the drill bore blowing apart machinery and igniting a fire that lasted two days, eventually collapsing the rig, which was operating in 5,000 feet of water.

Contrary to early speculation, piping at the drill hole on the seabed has not been resealed. When the rig sank, the pipe buckled into a heap above the ocean floor, rupturing at more than one point. This means that a steady stream of crude oil, estimated at 1,000 barrels or 42,000 gallons per day, is rising to the surface.

Efforts to contain the oil's spread have been met with limited success. Airplanes have doused the spill with a chemical solvent designed to dissipate the slick, while ships have been dragging boom lines to hem the spill to a confined area. Nonetheless, oil has reportedly moved to within 20 miles of the Louisiana coastline and had expanded to cover an area of 80 by 42 miles. The slick's spread has so far been lessened by favorable winds, but it is expected to reach the shoreline by Saturday.

The US Coast Guard said it will also attempt to corral dense concentrations of the oil and ignite it in controlled burns, also an undertaking of uncertain outcome. "Right now, it's a test burn," said Coast Guard officer Steve Lehmann. "We're trying to see how it works."

Ultimately the oil spill must be stopped at its source nearly a mile below the water's surface. It is not clear when, or how, this can be achieved.

An attempt to cap the oil leaks through a built-in remote controlled blowout mechanism, begun on Sunday, has thus far failed and remote-controlled submarine vehicles have been unable to activate seal valves in the piping. BP might also attempt to lower a dome-shaped apparatus to the seabed around the hole. This method has been used in shallow water spills, but never at such a depth, and scientists and engineers have

expressed doubts over its feasibility.

BP said it will proceed with plans to bore new holes in the vicinity of that emitting the oil in a bid to choke off its supply. This could take months, and there is no guarantee of success.

The spill threatens jobs and ecosystems over a broad area of the Gulf Coast encompassing Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida and Texas. If not contained, the oil slick will imperil Louisiana's \$2.4 billion commercial fishing industry. Among the major species fished are shrimp, oysters and grouper. It also threatens the Florida panhandle's white sand beaches and with them the region's tourism industry.

"We've never seen anything like this magnitude," said George Crozier, an oceanographer and director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab in Alabama. "The problems are going to be on the beaches themselves. That's where it will be really visible."

Louisiana's coastal waters and its vast Mississippi Delta contain about 40 percent of US wetlands and are home to nesting and spawning areas for hundreds of species of birds and fish. The area of the spill is also the habitat for a pod of sperm whales.

"If some of the weather conditions continue, the Delta area is at risk," said Charlie Henry of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The Obama administration has responded to the disaster—which claimed the lives of 11 workers and threatens the economy and ecology of the Gulf Coast—with indifference bordering on contempt. A search of the White House website reveals not a single comment by Obama on the explosion, no expressions of sympathy extended to the families of the missing and presumed dead, or even a declaration of concern over the threat to the Gulf.

Two days after the explosion, when the fate of the missing 11 men was still unknown, a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs if Obama had yet "reached out to anyone in Louisiana over the oil rig explosion." Gibbs responded, "Let me check on that. I don't believe so." The next day, Gibbs took a more callous posture, telling reporters, "In all honesty I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last."

It was not until April 26 that the White House articulated support for an investigation of the accident. According to the

New York Times, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the investigation would be given power of subpoena “and will look into possible criminal or civil violations by the operators of the drilling rig, Transocean.” Transocean is the world’s largest operator of off-shore oil rigs.

The White House has not singled out BP for criticism, limiting itself to holding a Tuesday meeting with “top executives” of the oil giant, according to the *Times*, in spite of its well-documented environmental and safety abuses.

In 2005, an explosion took place at a BP oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, killing 15 workers and injuring 170 others. BP had been cited for numerous safety violations prior to the explosion. In 2009, it was fined \$87 million for failing to address some of the same violations that caused the 2005 blast. BP has appealed the fine.

In August 2006, BP suspended operations in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, after it was revealed a corroded pipeline had discharged over 1 million liters of oil into the Alaskan tundra. Then in October 2007 it was revealed that BP had spilled about 2,000 gallons of methanol in the tundra, also at Prudhoe Bay. BP was named one of the “Ten Worst Polluters” by *Mother Jones* magazine in 2005.

BP has also been one of the main beneficiaries of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader push of US and British imperialism into the Mideast and Central Asia. In 2009 it won a contract, together with the China National Petroleum Corp, to develop Iraq’s largest oil deposits, the Rumaila field, boasting reserves of 17 billion barrels. BP is also the largest private stakeholder in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which runs from the Caspian Sea through the southern Caucasus and Turkey, avoiding US rivals Russia and Iran.

Some accounts indicate that BP, which as owner of the oil is legally liable for the spill, has not mobilized adequate resources for cleanup. “From the air Monday afternoon, the oil spill reached as far as the eye could see,” according to the Associated Press. “There was little evidence of a major cleanup, with only a handful of vessels near the site of the leak.”

A BP executive, Doug Suttles, boasted that BP was spending \$6 million per day on cleanup. This is but a tiny fraction of the company’s revenue, which totaled nearly \$250 billion in 2008. BP on Wednesday announced its first quarter profits, which more than doubled from 2009 to nearly \$5.6 billion, about 1,000 times what it is spending per day on cleanup in the Gulf.

BP is a major political donor to both parties. In 2007, it hired key Obama political adviser John Podesta and his lobbying firm to advance its interests on Capitol Hill.

Late last year BP publicly opposed new regulations under consideration for oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. BP Vice President Richard Morrison wrote a letter to the Minerals Management Service (MMS) stating, “We are not supportive of the extensive, prescriptive regulations as proposed in this rule.

We believe industry’s current safety and environmental statistics demonstrate that the voluntary programs” have been successful. The Obama administration did not put the new rules into effect.

The Obama administration has worked closely with Big Oil. In March, Obama proposed lifting a longstanding moratorium on the expansion of deep sea oil drilling along the Atlantic coast from Delaware to Florida. It also called for the expansion of drilling in the Gulf of Mexico and sensitive waters around Alaska. In doing so, the administration has echoed the oil industry in advancing the claim that deep sea drilling is perfectly safe. The Deepwater Horizon disaster exposes these claims.

The disaster was predictable. In spite of technological advances, blowouts still occur on shallow-water oil rigs. It was a virtual certainty that at some point a blowout would also take place on a deep water rig. But unlike a blowout in shallower waters, there is little or no experience with plugging a blown pipe one mile below the water’s surface, as the futile efforts to stop the hemorrhaging of oil from Deepsea Horizon’s drill hole have made clear.

Even in the wake of the disaster, Obama reiterated his plans for expanded offshore drilling. “We need the increased production,” Gibbs declared on April 23. “The president still continues to believe the great majority of that can be done safely, securely and without any harm to the environment.”

That Obama plans to proceed with a vast expansion of deep sea oil drilling in spite of this disaster speaks volumes about the character of his administration—and those environmentalist groups that called for his election as a means of blocking the policies of the Republican Party.

Obama has similarly promoted the expansion of coal mining in previously unprofitable areas. This has led to the working of previously ignored coal veins in mines in spite of safety risks. This was apparently one of the causes of the disaster at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia that claimed the lives of 29 workers. Obama’s energy policy, like that of Bush, subordinates both the lives of workers and the environment to the mad profit drive of the energy giants.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact