

White House admits BP disaster worst spill in US history

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After downplaying for weeks the significance of the Gulf Coast oil spill, the White House admitted on Monday that the Deepwater Horizon disaster constitutes the worst oil spill in US history. The admission from the White House comes as the Obama administration continues to insist that the response to the oil spill remain in the hands of BP.

“I don’t think there is any doubt, unfortunately,” Carol Browner, director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy, said Monday on CBS’ “The Early Show.” Some scientists estimate that the spill has already released 2.5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, ten times more than that released by the Exxon Valdez in 1989.

The admission from the Obama administration came after Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal announced on Monday that 70 miles of coastline had been contaminated by heavy crude oil. “That is more than the seashore line of Maryland and Delaware combined,” he said.

Popular anger has grown against both BP and the Obama administration as the enormous dimensions of the spill have become clear. A CBS poll released Tuesday showed that only 16 percent of the American people approve of the job that BP is doing, while 70 percent disapprove. Meanwhile, only 45 percent of those surveyed said they approve the Obama administration’s handling of the spill.

Local officials and residents continued to sharply denounce the response to the spill carried out by BP with Obama’s backing. Craig Taffaro, President of St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, told a local radio station that “the plan is to let us die, then come back and do \$75 million worth of cleanup and close the book.”

Christopher Herndon, a charter boat captain in Venice, Louisiana, said in a phone interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* that the spill was becoming “ten times worse than Katrina.”

“Every day there’s more oil,” he said. “There are just dead animals everywhere. Every time you go out you see

fish, birds, nutria, everything. It’s a crying shame.”

Herndon said that he and his fellow captains had been trying to find work on cleanup crews, but BP was not hiring. “There are thousands of boats, and thousands of people who could drive the boats,” he said. “BP is doing some things here and there, hiring some privately owned contract companies. But I say the government should have everybody who can move out there doing something to help.”

“Not even a quarter of the boats are engaged in the cleanup,” Herndon said. “They’re just trying to squeak by to make it look like they’re doing something.”

On Wednesday, BP will likely initiate a “top kill,” in which large quantities of heavy cement will be pumped directly into the rig’s failed blowout preventer, which sits on the ocean floor a mile beneath the water’s surface.

It may take two days to know if the top kill has succeeded—or whether it has made the spill worse. According to some industry experts, it is possible the blowout preventer could be torn apart by the added pressure, or that new ruptures could emerge in the piping.

Robert Bea, a professor of engineering at the University of California at Berkeley told the Associated Press that the attempt “carries a high risk of failure because of the velocity at which the oil may be spewing.” If oil is spilling at anything more than 1.6 million gallons per day “it’s going to spit everything back in your face,” Bea told the AP.

BP has indicated that during the top kill it will stop a live video feed of the oil spill, which it made available only last week after refusing to do so for weeks. Footage of the top kill, should it fail, would likely heighten public anger, as did a video released last week that showed that a pipe inserted in the rig’s ruptured riser was clearly not working as BP had claimed.

The repeated failures of BP to cap the oil head, which is spewing millions of gallons of oil into the gulf every day, have increasingly raised the question of why it has been left in charge.

Yet in press conferences this week Obama administration officials have continued to defend BP’s handling of the

spill, saying that “there is no reason to make a change” to the present relationship between the government and the company.

Occasional critical statements against BP put forth by figures in the Obama administration have been for public consumption—and just as often retracted. This was again the case this week when Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar backtracked from earlier suggestions that the government might play a more assertive role in the disaster.

After being publicly contradicted by Coast Guard commandant Thad Allen, Salazar retreated from earlier suggestions that the government might “push BP out of the way.” “The administration has done everything we can possibly do to make sure that we push BP to stop the spill and to contain the impact,” said Salazar, himself a close ally of the oil industry. “We have also been very clear that there are areas where BP and the private sector are the ones who must continue to lead the efforts with government oversight, such as the deployment of private sector technology 5,000 feet below the ocean’s surface to kill the well.”

On Tuesday, it was once again Obama’s turn to appear to be “angry and frustrated,” with the administration leaking to the press the president’s demand that BP “plug the damn hole.”

But “tough talk” from Obama and Salazar has not been joined to any appreciable policy change. Even largely symbolic gestures from the White House have simply been dismissed by the London-based oil giant. Last Wednesday the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gave BP 72 hours to stop spraying Corexit 9500, a highly toxic dispersant used to break up oil in the sea, until more data comparisons could be run against other—and by the EPA’s own data—less toxic and more effective dispersants.

BP simply flouted the injunction, and EPA head Lisa Jackson found herself on Tuesday again defending the response to the spill, accusing critics of “Monday-morning quarterbacking” in an interview with National Public Radio.

While the failures to stop the oil spill have created a political crisis for the Obama administration, its main concern is that any move to challenge BP’s control will raise the broader question of corporate control over the economy as a whole.

At a White House press conference on Monday, Commandant Allen responded to a reporter’s question as to why the government is not playing a greater role in the response to the spill by saying that BP owns “the means of production.” A reporter in the audience picked up the question, asking “You just said they own the means of production. But that could change...the President could simply decide that we now own...” before breaking off.

The reporter appeared to be on the verge of suggesting that

the government should take over the “means of production,” because BP is not handling them properly—a position that is all but censored in US political discourse.

The Obama administration’s decision to leave BP in charge of the oil spill is entirely predictable. This is the same government that has turned over trillions in public money to the very Wall Street finance houses that in 2008 triggered the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, destroying hundreds of millions of jobs the world over.

Just as Wall Street seized on the financial crisis to secure new riches, BP’s “cleanup” is guided by its determination to defend corporate revenue and limit its liability for the destruction of the Gulf Coast’s environment—and with it tens of thousands of jobs.

The same motivation lies behind the Obama administration’s insistence that only BP has the “expertise” to handle the disaster. A similar argument—that only the oil industry has the know-how to monitor its own activities—has been advanced by Republican and Democratic politicians for decades in order to advance deregulation. Deregulation, it is now clear, created the conditions for the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon, which took the lives of 11 workers.

The Obama administration, along with the entire media and political establishment, unconditionally defends the principle that the economy must be controlled by corporations, operating in the pursuit of private profit and the accumulation of individual wealth. It is this premise that explains the utterly feckless character of the government’s response.



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