

The Gulf oil spill: An American Chernobyl

Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party (US)
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With each passing day, the scale of the disaster unleashed by the oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico increases. Somewhere between 5,000 (the official estimate) and 25,000 (the estimate of some scientists) barrels of oil is surging into the Gulf every day. Before it is over, millions, if not tens of millions of gallons of oil will be washed up on America's wetlands and shorelines.

Eleven workers are already dead in the latest industrial disaster in the American energy industry. Now, the fishing and seafood industry along the Gulf coast may be shut down for years, perhaps even a generation. The destruction of the fragile ecosystems of the region will likely be irreparable.

The disaster implicates one of the world's largest corporations, British Petroleum, together with partners and subcontractors like Transocean Ltd., operator of the drill rig, and Halliburton, which carried out major operations on the wellhead only a week before the explosion.

None of the giant corporations that created this disaster has any solution. When it first began the deep-water drilling project 15 months ago, BP gave assurances that "it is unlikely that an accidental oil spill release would occur from the proposed activities." Even in the event of a spill, the company claimed that "due to the distance to shore (48 miles) and the response capabilities that would be implemented, no significant adverse impacts are expected."

The assurances given since the explosion have been no more believable. BP and its partners claimed at first that the rig was stable and the well capped without leakage. After the rig sank and the pipeline ruptured, BP said there was only incidental spillage of oil. Even

after admitting the existence of the leak, the company has sought to downplay the spill, and estimates have risen repeatedly. In one worst-case scenario, the outpouring of oil could surge as high as 100,000 barrels per day.

Between Thursday morning and Friday evening, the oil slick created by the spill tripled in size, to nearly 4,000 square miles. In addition to impacting on Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi, the spill could spread down the Gulf Coast of Florida all the way to the Florida Keys, where the Gulf Stream current would pull the floating crude right around the end of the peninsula and up the Atlantic seaboard.

The disaster is already the worst spill on record in the continental United States. If efforts fail to cap what one observer described as "an undersea oil volcano," the flow could continue until the entire pool of oil hit by the drill rig is exhausted, making the spill by far the largest in history.

While references are now being made to "Obama's Katrina," another comparison is perhaps more telling: Chernobyl. The meltdown of the nuclear reactor in 1986 poisoned a large swath of Ukraine and Belarus and caused an estimated 50,000 deaths. The event showed that, beneath claims of economic prosperity and military strength, the Stalinist regime in the USSR had become petrified and hollow.

The initial response of the Stalinist bureaucracy was to conceal and minimize the extent of the disaster. Only with time did its scale reach a broader consciousness. In the process, it exposed the bureaucracy's incompetence and indifference to the fate of the population.

For American capitalism, the past three decades have

been a period of putrefaction—socially, economically, culturally, and politically. The United States has clung to its position as the world’s dominant military power, but its internal rot has only deepened.

In the name of “getting government off your back” and unleashing the power of the free market, corporate America was given license to plunder, while the social infrastructure of the country deteriorated drastically—a fact that was revealed most dramatically in the failure of the levees in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

The Obama administration is matching the Bush administration in its subservience to the corporate elite and indifference to the welfare of the American people. The April 20 disaster came barely a month after Obama announced authorization for the expansion of offshore drilling in the Gulf and Atlantic Coast, insisting that drilling was absolutely safe, and demonstrating his subservience to the oil companies.

Since the explosion, the main concern of the administration has been to divert a popular backlash against the oil monopolies. BP has been left in control of the wellhead operations, in effect leaving the perpetrator in control of the crime scene.

The top government official on the scene, Coast Guard Commandant Thad Allen, defended BP Friday against criticism for not planning for the kind of equipment failure that appeared to cause the disaster. “It’s hard to write a plan for a catastrophic event that has no precedent, which is what this was,” he said, “what could never be in a plan, what you couldn’t anticipate.”

That such a statement can be made is only testament to the recklessness of the American ruling class, obsessively focused on the next day’s stock market fluctuations. In fact, an eventual explosion such as that which occurred was entirely foreseeable. Similar accidents have occurred elsewhere—including off the coast of Australia last year. As with Hurricane Katrina, scientists have worried about the “big one”—an unrestrained leak from a deep-sea well near the US coast—for years.

After largely ignoring the disaster during the first week, the White House is hoping that a photo op can somehow patch things up. Obama’s visit to the Gulf Coast, however, cannot conceal the fact that neither he nor the government has anything to offer to prevent the looming catastrophe. By the administration’s own admission, any solution to the oil spill could be months off.

Once again, the population of the world is presented with a sober reminder of the enormous destructive potential of the giant corporations that control the world economy. From global financial meltdown, to environmental devastation and climate change, to mass impoverishment and disease—the subordination of mass society to the profit interests of these companies produces one disaster after the next.

Those responsible for this latest disaster, including corporate executives and government officials, must be brought to account and criminally prosecuted. Above all, the transformation of these corporations into publicly-owned and democratically-controlled entities—by which their relationship to nature and society can be consciously regulated to meet social need—is a pressing necessity.

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