

# New York Times minimizes Gulf oil spill

Tom Eley  
5 May 2010

The April 20 blowout on a BP oil rig 50 miles off Louisiana's coast, which claimed the lives of 11 workers, continues to gush millions of gallons of heavy crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico with no clear end in sight. The disaster has already led to major economic and environmental devastation, with the Gulf Coast's multi-billion-dollar fishing industry suspended in high season.

With the calamity resulting from the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon growing worse by the day, the *New York Times*, the leading publication of US liberalism and self-styled "newspaper of record," declares in a Tuesday "news analysis" that the spill is really not so serious after all. The column, "Gulf Oil Spill Is Bad, but How Bad?" is a thoroughly dishonest piece whose clear aim is to chloroform mounting public anger against BP and the Obama administration.

The *Times* starts its column with a series of lies and half-truths. Dismissing "some experts" who "predict apocalypse," authors John Broder and Tom Zeller declare that the "Deepwater Horizon blowout is not unprecedented, nor is it yet among the worst oil accidents in history." In the *Times*' estimation, whether or not it achieves historic status "will depend on a long list of interlinked variables."

With millions of gallons of oil spilled near a densely populated and economically crucial area, the Deepwater Horizon disaster is already among the worst oil spills in history, the *Times*' "long list of interlinked variables" notwithstanding.

What remains to be seen—and this depends ultimately on stopping the spill at its source one mile beneath the water's surface—is where the BP spill will rank among the worst ecological catastrophes in human history. It is this extraordinary depth that does, indeed, make the Deepwater Horizon spill "unprecedented"—and what makes stemming the gushing of oil near the seabed in the

Gulf of Mexico's Mississippi Canyon so difficult. This aspect of the spill is the direct consequence of the Obama and Bush administrations' promotion of deep sea oil drilling.

The *Times*' goal is not to clarify the origins and scope of the disaster, but to sedate and confuse its readership. This the article attempts to do by offering distorted comparisons to other spills.

BP's Deepwater Horizon spill, according to Broder and Zeller, "could flow for years and still not begin to approach the 36 billion gallons of oil spilled by retreating Iraqi forces when they left Kuwait in 1991" (emphasis added). This statistic is an out-and-out fabrication based on claims made during the first Gulf War that Iraqi soldiers—who US missiles killed by the thousands as they retreated from Kuwait—had first sabotaged Kuwaiti oil wells.

Questioned by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Broder said the statistic is located on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) web site. A search of the site reveals a 1991 report from the National Oceanic Service claiming that the Iraqi military had dumped 900,000,000 barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf. Both the story and the statistic have since been discredited as Broder, who refused further comment, is no doubt aware. According to a 1993 study, commissioned by the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission at UNESCO and several Persian Gulf nations, about 330 million gallons spilled, resulting in "few unequivocal oil pollution effects attributable solely to the 1991 oil spills." Later estimates put the figure between 40 million and 63 million gallons, about 0.1 percent of the *Times*' claim.

The *Times* also complacently declares that Deepwater Horizon "will have to get much worse before it approaches the impact of the Exxon Valdez accident of 1989." In fact, by many scientific estimates the current

spill may have already surpassed the Valdez.

Ian MacDonald, an oceanographer at Florida State University, estimated that already by April 28, nearly 9 million gallons had been released. SkyTruth, a non-profit environmental analysis firm, put the figure at 12.2 million gallons by Sunday.

Broder and Zeller simply ignore these and other widely reported estimates. Yet even the low-end estimate put forth by the US Coast Guard of 210,000 gallons daily would mean that 3 million gallons have so far been dumped—with no indication that the hemorrhaging can be slowed before the disaster approaches or surpasses the Valdez spill, which poured nearly 11 million gallons into Alaska's Prince William Sound in 1989.

After minimizing the spill, the *Times* concludes on an incongruous note, arguing that the Gulf of Mexico is already polluted—so really, why worry about a few million more gallons of oil.

"The gulf is not a pristine environment and has survived both chronic and acute pollution problems before," Broder and Zeller write. "Thousands of gallons of oil flow into the gulf from natural undersea well seeps every day, engineers say, and the scores of refineries and chemical plants that line the shore from Mexico to Mississippi pour untold volumes of pollutants into the water." By the same logic, one might argue that because people produce carbon dioxide when they breathe, there is no point in worrying about atmospheric pollution!

The *Times* dresses up all of this obfuscation as objective journalism. According to Broder and Zeller, "No one, not even the oil industry's most fervent apologists, is making light of this accident." No one—except of course the *New York Times*!

Tuesday's "news analysis" continues the *Times*' miserable record on the Deepwater Horizon explosion and deep sea drilling more generally.

Scientists and environmentalists have warned for years that a blowout was likely on a deep sea oil rig—which would present enormous difficulties to stop. But the media failed to widely report these warnings.

Even after the April 20 explosion, the media, led by the

*Times*, dutifully parroted assurances from BP and the Obama administration that there was no oil spill. Like Obama, the media has largely ignored the workers killed and the families left behind in the blast. While the *Times of London* managed an article listing the names of those killed, the *Times of New York* has not.

On the other hand, the *New York Times* sprang to the defense of deep sea oil drilling. The only real concern it raised in a April 23 editorial, "Explosion in the Gulf," was that the accident could provide "new fodder" to drilling's opponents. "The explosion occurred just weeks after President Obama decided to open parts of America's coastal waters to exploratory drilling," the *Times* wrote, referring to Obama's call to lift moratoriums on drilling off the Atlantic Coast, Florida's Gulf Coast, and northern Alaskan water. "This tragedy is not reason enough to reverse that decision."

The newspaper's first aim is to defend the Obama administration, whose indifference to the explosion and spill has generated widespread anger—and many comparisons to the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged the Gulf Coast in 2005.

Behind this is a more fundamental concern. The BP oil spill is bringing millions of people face to face with the essence of capitalism—the subordination of everything, including the very survival of the planet—to the destructive profit drive of the corporate and financial elite. The *New York Times*, a long-serving organ of this elite, seeks to forestall this dawning awareness.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**