

Spill cleanup workers face labor-camp conditions

Andre Damon, C.W. Rogers in Louisiana
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Among the many victims of the BP spill are the thousands of cleanup workers hired by the company and contractors to lay boom, operate skimmer boats and comb beaches for oil.

The workers come from all over the United States—as far away as Alaska—and are of dozens of nationalities. Many do not speak English. Many have taken jobs cleaning up oil due to the very high unemployment rate—these are some of the only jobs available.

The beach cleanup workers work on the shores in dozens, handling toxic oil without full protective gear, breathing poisoned air and suffering dehydration and heat strokes under the hot sun. Over the past week, temperatures in Southern Louisiana have averaged over 90 degrees.

Many are concerned about falling ill from exposure to oil and dispersant. “I just want to work and get my paycheck; I don’t want to get sick from this,” said one worker, who asked to remain anonymous because he will lose his job for speaking to the media. “I’m concerned about my health.”

Cleanup employees were regularly having their wages withheld from them at some companies, according to a lead cleanup worker in Grand Isle, Louisiana, who asked to remain anonymous.

“We had our wages held for days on end last week,” the worker said in an interview on Saturday. “They do this every time; they hold the wages and bank the money,” he said.

For the past two pay periods, Louisiana-based Ashland Services LLC, the labor contractor he works for, has given workers the same story. “Every pay period, they blame the late payments on the payroll company. But of course they don’t tell us the name of the company; that’s

because it’s a lie; payroll companies don’t make those types of mistakes.”

“Last week there was almost a riot,” he added. “They have 600 people to pay and they only had 28 checks,” he said. “They had to call in the buses early and get everyone back to the tent city where we’re staying before it got out of control. They told everyone that checks would be waiting for them there but that was a lie too.”

BP gives the companies that hire cleanup workers a lump sum for the job, based on how much they think it will cost, he said. “They just bank the cash and pay the workers late to get some extra off the top.”

Some workers have been fired before the end of the pay period, without getting a single paycheck or having enough money to get home. When this happened to one worker, her fellow employees, not the contractor, took care of her. “We all pooled in enough money for her to buy bus tickets back,” said the worker.

“It’s just chaos down here,” he said. “We’ve had people working for weeks, and all of a sudden they’re told they’re not even hired; Ashland says they have no record of them working and don’t have their work applications. People are told to re-file applications over and over. They find every possible way to scam you out of your pay.”

“One girl I work with was told to re-file her application five times. This is a contracting company; how can you lose that many applications? How can you not take care of your people?” he said. “It’s not like it’s getting better, it’s getting worse.”

BP has subcontracted nearly all recovery activities to private contractors like Ashland Services. The workers on Grand Isle, Louisiana, are being paid as little as \$12 an hour, and are forced to provide their own transportation to

and from the region.

“I’ve worked with these disaster-relief companies before,” said Dean Blanchard, owner of a shrimp processing and distribution company in Grand Isle, Louisiana. “The worse it is, the more money they get. Their *modus operandi* is, let [the disaster] get as big as it can, then go to the bank,” he said.

The local fishermen brought in to clean up the spill face their own set of problems. They must stand idly by while the oil spill destroys the shores and bayous that have sustained their families for generations.

Walter, a skimming boat captain from Charleston, South Carolina, said that skimming is ineffective. “We’re barely doing anything. Out of 150 million gallons, we haven’t picked up two million,” he said. “They deliberately sunk all the oil to the bottom as a PR move. There just isn’t much for us to skim.”

John, a cleanup worker for BP from Missouri, said that a boat with six men can work a whole day, and only gather fifteen gallons of oil. Dean Blanchard has seen even worse figures, with some of the shrimping boats he works with reporting that they gathered only 4-5 gallons per day.

Kevin, a shrimper from Venice, said he was now doing cleanup work because no other work was available. “There will be nothing back here when this is over; I doubt they will ever get this well capped, even after they drill the relief wells.”

“I should be out there on the bayou. I got my boat all ready, and I’ve got nothing left,” he said.

Kevin said that his job is comparatively easy, since he works in air and water sampling. “My father has been on a skimming boat offshore for fifty days, without even a day on land to stretch his legs,” he said.

“The government should just pay cleanup workers by the gallon, or at least give them the ability to decide how they want to fight the spill,” said Blanchard. “The fishermen are fishers of the sea; they can catch anything; be it shrimp or anything else,” said Blanchard. “They are simple people, but they know what they’re doing. Now, they’re being hired to do nothing.”



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