

The socialist response to the Gulf oil crisis

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The continued eruption of oil from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico is an unmitigated catastrophe, with incalculable economic and ecological consequences.

The Obama administration is now admitting what independent scientific experts have been maintaining for weeks: that this is the worst environmental disaster in the history of the United States. There is little prospect that the unchecked flow of oil from the Deepwater Horizon site can be stopped before the end of August, if even then.

Government scientists estimate that as much as one million gallons of oil are flowing every day, while other scientists have calculated the rate to be several times this amount. By the end of the summer, at least one hundred million gallons will have been dumped into the Gulf—many times more than the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill. In the worst-case scenario, the entire reservoir could be emptied—and no one knows how much oil this means.

Hundreds of thousands of people who depend directly or indirectly on the fishing industry in the Gulf face the loss of their livelihoods. Entire species may be wiped out and fragile ecosystems devastated.

Today marks the official beginning of the hurricane season. At least a half a dozen major storms are expected to strike the US mainland. A large hurricane intersecting the slick would propel both crude oil and the toxic chemical dispersants onto the shoreline and into the atmosphere, with incalculable consequences for public health.

The event has global implications. If it has not already happened, the oil will soon link up with the “loop current,” which will pull the slick around the southern tip of Florida. From there, the Gulf Stream current could spread toxic waste up the US eastern seaboard and ultimately across the Atlantic to the coast of Western Europe.

There remains a vast gulf between the immense scale of the disaster and the response from the government and the mass media. From the beginning, there has been a systematic attempt to downplay the significance of the event. The Obama administration did nothing for weeks. Its main concern was to prevent the BP disaster from disrupting plans for expanding offshore oil drilling, which Obama, like Bush, has aggressively supported.

In relation to BP, the administration has displayed a complete paralysis, once again unable to take any action that interferes with the interests of the giant corporations that control the American and world economy.

BP has been left in control of the response operations, with the administration repeating the line that only BP has the scientific expertise to handle the situation. The company has employed one maneuver after another, all of which have been intended primarily to cover up the fact that neither BP nor the government had in place any contingency plans.

The Obama administration operates under the assumption that all that is required is the mouthing of meaningless phrases about being “angry and frustrated,” that mass popular outrage can somehow be managed through well-tested media techniques and public relations stunts.

Popular anger, however, is growing by the day. This anger and opposition must be armed with a political perspective, directed not only at BP and the other large corporations directly responsible for this disaster, but at the entire political and economic system that made such a catastrophe all but inevitable.

Despite the attempts by BP and the US government to present the disaster as unforeseeable, it is the product of

the decades of “free market” policies aimed at eliminating all constraints on corporate profit making.

With each passing day, more is revealed about the way in which BP deliberately cut corners on safety, facilitated by the federal Minerals Management Service (MMS), which rubber-stamped all of BP’s actions up to the day of the explosion. Despite ample warnings of an impending disaster—including leaks in the blowout preventer, the failure of which has cut off attempts to cap the eruption—BP was determined to push ahead with the drilling. At the same time, additional safety measures and backups were not installed, with the oil industry unwilling to pay the extra costs.

Regulation of oil industry operations has been left in the hands of the oil industry itself, with the MMS and the government functioning as little more than an auxiliary of corporate interests. This relationship has continued unabated under Obama. In 2009, the administration directly intervened after a court ruled that Bush’s offshore oil drilling plan did not include sufficient environmental impact studies. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar insisted that oil drilling in the Gulf should continue, citing the Deepwater Horizon project in particular.

This disaster is another demonstration of the way in which global society is vulnerable to the destructive operations of privately owned corporations, whose guiding principle is profit and the enrichment of private shareholders.

The government has committed massive resources to the military and the Department of Homeland Security, on the pretext that the greatest threat to the American people is some sort of terrorist action. And yet, during the course of the past decade, the greatest catastrophes have been created by giant corporations and the capitalist system. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina exposed the decay of social infrastructure in the United States. In 2008, the operations of finance companies plunged the world into economic recession. Now, the criminal actions of BP have led to the poisoning of the Gulf of Mexico.

Emergency measures are necessary to deal with this disaster. First, vast economic and social resources must be mobilized to limit the environmental disaster to the extent possible and provide jobs for all those affected in

the region. BP has hired only a tiny fraction of those able to work, as the company is concerned above all with its bottom line.

A criminal investigation into the activities of BP, Transocean, Halliburton and other companies must be launched. Top executives should be arrested and held accountable for this disaster.

An international committee of scientists and other experts must be convened, completely independent of the corporations and the government, to determine the extent of the catastrophe and the necessary measures that must be taken. No confidence can be placed in the Obama administration or any section of the political establishment to do anything but continue to cover for BP and the oil industry.

As the days and weeks pass, the impact of the disaster will escalate, as the unanticipated consequences come to light. One thing is certain: the ultimate cost of this disaster will be in the hundreds of billions of dollars. The resources for this must come from the oil companies themselves. BP and other energy companies must be immediately nationalized and placed under democratic control.

These measures must be part of a far broader socialist reorganization of the American and world economy. This catastrophe is an expression of the historical bankruptcy of the capitalist system. It must be replaced with socialism—the organization of economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

The Socialist Equality Party is spearheading the struggle for a mass socialist movement of the working class in the United States and around the world. We urge all those who agree with this program to join the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight for this program.

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