

# Fishermen on strike against BP

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Louisiana fishermen hired by BP to assist with cleanup efforts in the Gulf of Mexico went out on strike Tuesday to protest against the oil giant's decision to force them to stay in quarter ships nicknamed "flotels." Workers, who were obligated to stay on the ships for periods of 18 days straight with only 3 days off, were not paid for their time on the flotels.

The ships can house over 500 workers, with each compartment containing bunks lining the walls, up to 12 per room. Dining halls and showers are shared, with one bathroom for every 4 compartments.

BP is relocating workers to these ships in order to extract more productivity from them by eliminating the time it takes to transport workers to cleanup sites, and to save on the cost of hotels.

The local press in Louisiana this week reported the angry protests of some of the fishermen on strike in Myrtle Grove. Jules Dag, a fisherman for half a century who has been hired by BP to lay oil containment boom in the Gulf, told New Orleans' WDSU station, "We're on strike, so we're not going to work. So [my boat's] got to sit here till we go back to work."

"I'm not living on no quarter boat," he added, "When I signed up, the agreement was we lived at a motel or somewhere they supplied us to live."

Like several other of the striking fishermen, Dag says cleanup workers are not being paid. "What are we suppose to do?," he asked. "We ain't been paid yet. We've used almost everything we got to live out here already. Forty days, we ain't seen nothing yet. What are we supposed to do for money?"

Another fishermen complained to Louisiana's WVUE station about the living conditions on the quarter ship. "We can't lock our rooms and we all got to share one TV," he said. "I'm not in prison. If I wanted to be in prison I would break the law and go to jail."

On Tuesday, the same day Myrtle Grove workers

walked off the job, a fire broke out in the dining hall of one of the company's "flotels" stationed in the Baptiste Collette Bayou. Five cleanup workers were injured in the blaze. No explanation has yet been given for the origin of the fire.

Cleanup workers in the Gulf are faced with horrendous conditions. Fishermen working on cleanup crews have had their livelihoods stripped away from them by the oil spill, and have little choice but to go to work for the corporation responsible. They work long hours cleaning up or containing the toxic sludge unleashed into the environment by BP.

Ample evidence has emerged that these workers are not receiving the proper training or equipment needed to safely handle the toxic mixture of oil and chemical dispersant contaminating the waters. There have been several reports of cleanup workers claiming BP has threatened to fire anyone who shows up to work with a respirator, an essential piece of safety equipment given the nature of the work. This is of a piece with BP's effort to downplay the seriousness of the environmental contamination in the media.

A study of air quality conducted by BP in early July showed that workers were being exposed to a dangerous chemical, 2-butoxyethanol, known to have caused or contributed to illnesses in spill workers from the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster. Dr. David Michaels, the assistant secretary of labor for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has also complained to BP that workers are not receiving the required 40 hours of training in handling hazardous materials.

The latest numbers from the Louisiana Department of Health report 290 health complaints relating to the oil spill, 216 of these coming from cleanup workers.

Just days before the Myrtle Grove workers walked off the job, Kenneth Feinberg, the administrator of the \$20 billion compensation fund set up by BP, announced that any money paid to fishermen assisting in cleanup work

under the Vessels of Opportunity program would be subtracted from compensation settlements they might receive in the future under the fund.

Virtually every week brings new evidence of abuses and exploitation of cleanup workers in the Gulf. Such conditions go hand in hand with the subordination of cleanup operations to the profit interests of BP. The same cutting of corners and criminal negligence exhibited by the oil giant in the run-up to the April 20 Deepwater Horizon disaster are now guiding the recovery efforts.

In this, the Obama administration, including the regulatory agencies responsible for the oil industry and workplace safety, has been entirely complicit.



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