BP's Hayward out, with golden parachute

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BP announced that CEO Tony Hayward, who has become a potent symbol of corporate arrogance and greed, will step down on October 1. Hayward, who is British, will be replaced by American Robert Dudley. Dudley is overseeing the company's response to the Gulf oil disaster, one of the worst ecological catastrophes in history.

The move by BP is aimed at allowing the company, and the oil industry as a whole, to continue on with business as usual in the face of immense popular outrage over the oil spill. With the capping of the well, the Obama administration and the corporate and political establishment are seeking to put the disaster behind them and resume lucrative offshore oil drilling.

While most Gulf residents will not see a dime in compensation for the massive economic dislocation and public health crisis caused by the spill, Hayward stands to make off with millions.

Hayward will receive an undisclosed severance package of at least $1.6 million, a $600,000 per year pension that he can collect beginning at age 55—in two years' time—and a lucrative new position with TNK-BP, a BP "joint venture with a group of Russian billionaires," according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

The job with TNK-BP "can hardly be described as banishment to Siberia, or a rest cure," the *Journal* notes. Indeed, TNK-BP is the third largest oil producer in Russia and "the jewel in the crown for BP," according to analyst Roland Nash of Renaissance Capital.

Neither Hayward nor any other BP official has faced punishment of any kind for the disaster, in spite of overwhelming evidence that the London-based firm made repeated decisions to subordinate health and safety concerns in the lead-up to the April 20 blowout on the Deepwater Horizon, which killed 11 workers.

Hayward continued at the helm of BP through the first three months of the blowout despite the oil giant's persistent efforts to cover up the massive scope of the disaster—and in spite of Hayward's provocative statements that have inflamed popular anger.

In the first weeks after the blowout, Hayward asserted that damages would be "very, very, modest," because, he said, the Gulf of Mexico is a "very big ocean." Later, Hayward was caught on tape yelling "get out of here!" to news media attempting to view cleanup operations. As the scope of the disaster began to come into focus, Hayward declared that he was interested in solving the spill because of its personal burdens on him. "I would like my life back," he said.

Even in announcing his retirement Hayward could not help but stick his finger in the public's eye once more. He declared BP's spill response a "model of corporate social responsibility," complained he had been "demonized and vilified" in the US, and declared himself likely "too busy" to attend any future US Congressional hearings on the disaster.

Yet Hayward's penchant for provocation is not the reason for his removal; his contempt for the people of the Gulf Coast is in fact shared by the US corporate elite and both political parties. And while Hayward's comments have stirred some politicians to half-hearted criticisms of BP and its CEO, Hayward never lacked for ruling class support, particularly in British and US financial circles. He also enjoyed the tacit support of the Obama administration, which refused to demand a shakeup in BP leadership. Hayward would not be sacrificed to satiate popular anger, it became clear early on.

Rather, the move to push Hayward aside and replace him with an American executive seems to be aimed at easing Transatlantic tensions and improving BP business prospects in the US. US politicians have seized on the Gulf disaster to advance the geo-political aims of US oil giants ExxonMobil and Chevron. While residents of the Gulf have been all but abandoned,

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prominent senators and congressmen have staged a controversy over BP's possible role in freeing aged Libyan convict Abdul Baset Ali al-Megrahi, the Libyan who was jailed for the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 that killed 270 people. (See "Cameron negotiates BP-Libya minefield in Washington")

Hayward alluded to this in a Tuesday conference call with reporters. "I believe that it is not possible for the company to move on in the United States with me remaining as the face to BP," he said. "So I think that for the good of BP, and particularly for the good of BP in the United States, it is right for me to…step down."

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