

# Gulf oil spill: 100 days of disaster

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The first 100 days of the BP Gulf oil catastrophe have provided an object lesson in the destructiveness and irrationality of capitalism, which subordinates every consideration to the profit drive of the giant corporations and banks.

The April 20 blowout aboard the Deepwater Horizon was, in the fullest sense of the phrase, a disaster waiting to happen. There had been no systematic regulatory enforcement on the Deepwater Horizon or any other Gulf of Mexico oil rig under either president Obama or his predecessor, George W. Bush.

As for existing legal safety requirements, the order of the day was, and remains, “self-reporting.” This was in keeping with the decades-long promotion of deregulation, backed by both parties. Industry itself, the politicians proclaimed, was the only legitimate arbiter of what is safe and beneficial to workers, the environment, and the population.

The disastrous results of deregulation, which surfaced first in the collapse of the global financial markets in 2008, are obvious in the Gulf disaster. There is overwhelming evidence that the blowout was caused by the criminal negligence of BP, aided and abetted by bought-and-paid-for federal “regulators” who did little more than run interference for the oil industry.

Both Obama and Bush relentlessly promoted deep-sea oil drilling in spite of innumerable warnings from scientists and environmentalists that technology and regulations to prevent blowouts and respond to them when they occur were inadequate. Systems and equipment for deep-sea drilling, including the now notorious “blowout preventer,” were untested at such depths.

On top of this, it has been documented that the Department of the Interior under the Obama administration took special legal actions to speed the Macondo well along toward production, specifically exempting BP from submitting a legally-required environmental impact statement.

In the rig’s last days, BP’s requests for approval of clearly hazardous decisions were rubber-stamped in a matter of minutes by the Department of the Interior. Then, as the blowout spiraled out of control, the rig’s untested blowout preventer failed, the alarm system was partially disabled, and there proved to be no adequate plan in place to evacuate the rig and respond to a fire. Indeed, it is believed that the haphazard attempt to extinguish the fire by dumping massive quantities of water on it actually capsized the rig, likely exacerbating the

blowout as the riser pipe crumpled beneath the sinking vessel.

This total regulatory breakdown before a series of profit-driven decisions by BP killed 11 rig workers, leaving behind widows, children, fathers and mothers. And yet not a single representative of BP has been fired or disciplined, much less charged with a crime. No significant official from the Obama administration has stepped down.

As disastrous as it was, the explosion turned out to be only the beginning. The very conditions that led to the blowout—the subordination of all concerns to profit—has dictated every decision in the response to the disaster.

In the initial 48 hours after the explosion, with the fate of the missing workers still unknown, survivors from the rig were quarantined—not for medical evaluation, but so that attorneys from rig-owner Transocean could “debrief” them and blackmail them into signing legal waivers.

For over a week the Obama administration disregarded the spill—besides emphasizing that the “incident,” as Obama first dubbed it, would in no way lessen its support for the lifting of a moratorium on offshore drilling up and down the Atlantic Coast. “In all honesty I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last,” declared White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs several days after the explosion.

After belatedly recognizing the dimensions of the disaster, Obama placed BP in charge of the response and the cleanup, converting the US Coast Guard into a private security force used to block the media and citizens from seeing what the gusher had wrought. The clear conflict of interest in placing the criminal in charge of its crime scene was disregarded; only BP, it was declared, had the expertise to handle the spill.

For months BP and the Obama administration sought to minimize the catastrophe. Lie after lie was exposed only under the scrutiny of independent scientists, who were able to calculate based on what little they were allowed to see that this disaster was far worse than the public was being told.

The subordination of the response and the cleanup to BP’s financial interests only served to intensify the disaster. With the rate of the spill intentionally underestimated—early on by a factor of 100—there was no way an adequate response could be mounted. At the same time, BP’s control over efforts to stop the gusher resulted in one debacle after another—recorded in the now-infamous words “containment dome,” “top hat,” “top

kill,” and “junk shot.”

As the epic scale of the disaster became undeniable in late June, the Obama administration moved to defend BP from a feared avalanche of litigation. This is the role assigned to ruling class fixer Kenneth Feinberg and his Independent Claims Facility, a fact that the “claims czar” has not hid. “Investors in BP should know that there’s now an alternative to the litigation system in place,” he told CNBC last month. “I think that’s a really helpful sign if you’re an investor.”

BP’s \$20 billion escrow will ostensibly cover all costs for response and cleanup, plus all damages. BP will be allowed to fund the escrow over four years—or maybe not; the Obama administration has insisted \$20 billion is “neither a floor nor a ceiling.” BP will also write off \$10 billion in taxes in the US and an undisclosed sum in the United Kingdom, it recently announced.

In a series of public statements since the founding of the fund, Feinberg has outlined policies that will prevent the vast majority of Gulf workers and residents from receiving any compensation for their losses.

Now, 100 days into the disaster, BP’s reported success in finally capping the Macondo well has, predictably, provided occasion for the Obama administration to “move on” and for the media to push the worst environmental catastrophe in North American history to the back pages.

Whether or not the oil has been stopped definitively is far from certain. There remain concerns that the well itself or even the surrounding seabed could be dangerously compromised.

The one certainty is that the American people are not being told the truth. Since the April 20 blowout the record of public statements from both BP and the White House reads like a catalog of lies and evasions.

Even if the gusher is at an end, the disaster has inflicted a devastating blow upon the Gulf. According to a range of official and scientific estimates, somewhere between 95 million and 327 million gallons of heavy crude have been dumped into the Gulf. BP’s own stated goal for on-surface ship receiving capacity—3.4 million gallons per day—would indicate that the total spill volume is in the neighborhood of 260 million gallons. On top of this, upwards of one million gallons of poisonous dispersants have been dumped.

Oil has fouled the coastline in Texas, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, where it threatens the Mississippi Delta—New Orleans’ main barrier to hurricanes—with irreparable damage. Massive underwater clouds of hydrocarbons are moving through the Gulf, depleting oxygen from layers of the water column. Entire species may vanish from the region.

The Gulf fishing industry has been shut down and is unlikely to recover for many years, if ever. The tourism industry has also been punished, bringing many proprietors to the brink of bankruptcy. Home values, already in sharp decline, especially in Florida, will be forced down further. Over 100,000 jobs are

immediately threatened by the disaster, according to one estimate. Tax revenue in the Gulf States will further contract, resulting in more layoffs of state workers and deeper cuts to social spending and education. A number of doctors and scientists have warned of the likelihood for a public health disaster that will last for years, particularly among cleanup workers, whom BP has denied basic training and safety equipment such as respirators.

In the face of this disaster, \$20 billion—even were it to be fully realized—is a pittance. This miserly sum ensures that the limited cleanup operations already underway will be largely scotched and the ecological and human health disaster left to fester. Fishermen and tens of thousands of tourism industry workers will be dumped into the greatest unemployment crisis since the Great Depression.

This cannot be allowed. All those who have suffered due to the spill must be made financially whole. Hundreds of billions must be made available for a massive cleanup campaign run by scientists, engineers, and public health experts, independent of BP and the government.

The claim that there is not enough money to undertake such a program is a lie. Trillions of dollars and the best technology can be made available through the expropriation of the oil industry and its conversion into a public utility under the democratic control of the working class.

This is in fact the only way to save the Gulf. But such a program demands as a first step the independent political mobilization of the working class, in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans and behind a socialist program that rejects the “right” of the oil giants to make billions at the expense of workers and the environment.



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