

Censorship and cover-up in the Gulf oil disaster

Tom Eley
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The Obama administration has intensified its cover-up of the BP oil disaster. On July 1 it issued an order barring the public and the news media from coming within 65 feet of clean-up operations without permission from the Coast Guard. The transparent aim of the order, which purports to protect the safety of clean-up workers, is to prevent the population from viewing the devastation wrought by the BP oil blowout.

The gag order states that anyone not authorized by the Coast Guard “must not come within 20 meters [65 feet] of booming operations, boom, or oil spill response operations under penalty of law.” The wording—“oil spill response operations”—could be construed as covering the entire affected region, which stretches from the Mississippi Delta to the Florida Panhandle.

Journalists who “willfully” defy the White House order could be prosecuted as Class D felons and face up to five years in prison and a \$40,000 fine. Exceptions to the ban will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Coast Guard captain of the Port of New Orleans.

In defending the order, Coast Guard Commander Thad Allen stated that the measure aims to protect clean-up workers, but he failed to cite a single incident of safety being compromised by “unauthorized personnel.”

The real concern the White House has is that clean-up workers might reveal something about the dangerous conditions under which they work and the real scale of the environmental devastation—defying a gag order imposed by BP. An unknown number of these workers—likely hundreds, perhaps thousands—have become sick from exposure to oil and toxic dispersants and may well face a lifetime of chronic ailments.

The new effort to gag the media continues a campaign launched three weeks ago by the

administration to reach what Obama adviser David Axelrod called an “inflection point” in the Gulf crisis. In a string of public relations events from June 11 through June 17, President Obama visited the Gulf for two days, gave a nationally televised Oval Office speech on the blowout, and met in the White House with BP CEO Tony Hayward and Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg.

That meeting resulted in the announcement that BP would finance a \$20 billion settlement fund, which would be “independently” administered. This was presented by Obama as a major concession wrenched from the oil company and a boon to the many thousands of Gulf residents whose livelihoods have been destroyed as a result of BP’s actions.

In reality, the deal was a boon to BP, effectively placing a cap over its major liabilities—for a disaster whose total costs will be reckoned in the hundreds of billions of dollars—and shielding it from lawsuits and damage claims.

“Investors in BP should know that there’s now an alternative to the litigation system in place,” Independent Claims Facility administrator Kenneth Feinberg told CNBC. “I think that’s a really helpful sign if you’re an investor.”

Feinberg has already declared that the fund will be off limits to the majority of those affected by the blowout—people in the tourism industry, fishermen who operate on a cash basis, Gulf coast homeowners whose property values will plunge.

The carefully scripted and orchestrated series of events in mid-June was meant to signal a halt to the anti-BP posturing by the government and begin a tamping down of media coverage of the catastrophe. In effect, the American people were told the poisoning of the

Gulf, with all of its consequences, would continue at least until BP completed its relief wells some time in August—and they should get used to it!

The latest move to censor coverage of the Gulf crisis is in keeping with this strategy and is in line with the Obama administration's policy ever since the Deepwater Horizon rig blew up on April 20, killing 11 workers. The primary concern of both BP and the White House has been to cover up the gravity of the pollution of vast parts of the Gulf of Mexico and beaches and wetlands in at least four US states.

At stake is not only the population's right to know what is happening to the seas, shores and wildlife that are now treated as the private property of BP, it is quite simply impossible to formulate an adequate response outside of an independent assessment of the extent of the damage.

There are by now countless reports of journalists and citizens being ordered away from beaches or blocked from viewing the spill from the land, air and sea by BP, the Coast Guard and hired security agents. In mid-June, the White House banned airplanes from flying over the spill zone at altitudes below 3,000 feet, and helicopters below 1,500 feet, without a special exemption from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

CNN's Anderson Cooper reported last week that journalists have been repeatedly barred from a government mobile hospital in Venice, Louisiana that is treating clean-up workers.

BP and its supplier Nalco, have even refused to reveal to scientists the chemical composition of Corexit, the dispersant that has been dumped by the hundreds of thousands of gallons into the Gulf to break up the oil, because, they say, it is a trade secret. BP simply defied an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) order issued one month ago, to cease use of Corexit pending further testing. Obama decided not to pursue the matter.

For nearly two months, BP and government stonewalling made it impossible even to assess how big the blowout was. Insisting from the first that BP was "in charge" of the clean-up, the administration colluded with the oil giant to block independent analysis of the gusher one mile beneath the surface of the Gulf. Only under steady criticism from scientists did the administration repeatedly revise upward the rate of the oil erupting from the sea floor. The spill is now, by all accounts, the largest in history.

All of this underscores the necessity to take the response to the oil disaster out of the hands of BP and the Obama administration.

The Gulf disaster requires a mass response. It is first of all necessary to bring together the best scientists and engineers in the world, give them full and unfettered access to all information related to the disaster, and place them in charge of hundreds of thousands of well-trained, well-equipped and well-paid workers.

The resources necessary for this undertaking can be realized by nationalizing BP and the entire oil industry and converting the industry into a public utility, democratically run by the working population in the interests of society as a whole.

This, in turn, requires the mass mobilization of the working class, independently of both parties of big business, based on a socialist program that rejects the "right" of corporations and financiers to unfathomable wealth at the expense of the people and the environment of the planet.

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