

Two years since the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster

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Two years ago yesterday, an explosion at the BP-run Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 workers and unleashed an oil spill that resulted in the worst environmental catastrophe in US history.

Before it was finally capped nearly three months later, the erupting well released 4.9 million barrels of oil, making it the largest accidental oil spill ever. It caused hundreds of billions of dollars in damage to the local economy, from Texas to Florida. Its impact on human health and the gulf ecosystem will last for decades, with consequences that are not fully known.

To this day, however, not a single executive—from BP, rig owner Transocean, or rig contractor Halliburton—has been held criminally responsible, and the oil giant has yet to pay any fines to the US government.

Meanwhile, BP is pulling in bumper profits. The company posted a \$26 billion profit in 2011, erasing a \$4 billion loss the year before. It anticipates even higher profits in the coming years, with oil prices on the rise and new drilling projects in the offing.

Last November, the Coast Guard approved drilling for BP's first offshore oil well since the spill, located 250 miles southwest of New Orleans and 1,000 feet deeper than the Macondo Prospect, the site of the Deepwater Horizon disaster. The company has stepped up its efforts to drill in even more remote areas, including the Arctic.

On Wednesday, BP finalized a \$7.8 billion settlement with some 100,000 fishermen, hotel owners and others whose livelihoods and health were affected by the spill. The deal puts an end to any speculation that BP might be made to pay the full \$20 billion it set aside for damages.

Under the Clean Water Act, the company is liable for up to \$17 billion in fines to the government. Confident that it will be made to pay far less than this, the company has put aside just \$3.5 billion for this purpose.

The ability of BP to so rapidly return to profitability and resume the dangerous operations that led to the disaster is

attributable to the actions of the Obama administration. The US government—before, during and after the spill—acted as an attorney for the oil giant.

Like countless other projects, BP's Deepwater Horizon drill plan was fast tracked by the government, first under Bush and then Obama. The company was allowed to proceed without making an environmental impact study, and Obama's secretary of the interior, Ken Salazar, intervened to oppose a ruling that would have delayed the operation.

With the Deepwater Horizon running behind schedule, BP executives made dozens of specific decisions to cut costs and sacrifice safety. Government regulators turned a blind eye, signing off on the company's plans with no questions asked.

When the disaster struck, the White House left all cleanup and recovery in the hands of the company, allowing BP to tamper with and destroy evidence. Government regulatory agencies and the Coast Guard were converted into virtual appendages of the company, which, in the months following the spill, was given virtual dictatorial powers over the Gulf coast.

From the start, the Obama Administration made it clear that the disaster would in no way impact its determination to expand offshore oil drilling. Three days after the disaster, which had already killed eleven people, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told the media, "We need the increased production ... I doubt this is the first accident that has happened and I doubt it will be the last."

For weeks after the explosion, the government and the media uncritically accepted and disseminated BP's false and self-serving estimates of the size of the spill, vastly underestimating its scale and consequences. The false information played an important role in preventing scientists, engineers and others from taking the necessary emergency measures needed to contain the disaster.

As the scale of the catastrophe became too great to conceal, the administration scrambled to protect BP and its executives. “Independent” claims czar Kenneth Feinberg was appointed, with the approval of BP, to oversee payouts to those affected. As he moved to limit claims, he declared his presence to be “a helpful sign” for investors.

The government's response to the BP disaster was analogous to its response to the financial crisis. Driven by the reckless pursuit of profit, corporations wreak havoc on the economy and environment alike. They carry out their criminal activities with impunity, shielded by the government. In the end, they make more money than ever.

The BP disaster and its aftermath are an indictment of the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of life to the accumulation of wealth by a privileged elite. The most elementary requirements of civilized life are incompatible with a system that is dominated politically as well as economically by a corporate and financial aristocracy.

Unless the power of the corporations and banks is broken, society can expect even greater disasters. Indeed, the worst accidental oil spill in history was followed only one year later by the Fukushima meltdown in Japan, the second worst nuclear disaster. The past year has, moreover, seen three significant oil spills—in China, off the coast of Brazil, and in the North Sea.

The BP disaster is an argument for socialism. Modern mass society—global, complex and interconnected—must no longer be subordinated to the irrational, anarchic and socially destructive drive for profit and personal enrichment. The corporations must be taken out of private hands and placed under the democratic control of society as a whole.

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