Five years since the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico

E.P. Bannon
23 April 2015

Monday, April 20, 2015 marked five years since the Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico, causing the worst ecological catastrophe in human history. Eleven workers were killed and 17 injured by the initial blast, and over 200 million gallons of oil gushed out of the wellhead into the Gulf of Mexico. The effects in terms of environmental damage, human suffering, and economic hardship cannot be overstated, yet five years have passed and none of the perpetrators have been held accountable for their actions.

The press remained largely silent in the immediate wake of the spill. Except for reporting by local newspapers, there was a media blackout on the affair as London-based oil giant British Petroleum (BP) and the Obama administration scrambled to cover up the true extent of the damage.

It was only the *World Socialist Web Site* that provided front-line reporting and analysis. The WSWS was the only news outlet to attend the funerals of the workers killed in the Deepwater Horizon blast. Throughout the period following the disaster, the WSWS consistently pointed out the environmental, economic and social havoc wrought by BP as well as the Obama Administration's drive to shield them from any real consequences.

Even today, the full scope of the long-term negative environmental impact remains unknown. A study by the *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences* published last year stated that the 2010 spill left behind a massive "bathtub ring" of crude oil roughly three times the size of New York City. An estimated 2 million barrels of oil remain trapped in the ocean in a miles-long deep-water plume whose whereabouts remain unknown.

Despite official claims of recovery, numerous studies have noted sharp declines in shrimp, oyster, crab, and many other marine populations. Sperm whales, whose diet consists of an array of fish, squid and octopi, are no longer feeding in a vast section of the Gulf of Mexico. This means there is a problem in the food chain, suggesting that large sections of marine life may be slowly dying off. Researchers discovered that deep-sea coral lies in the contaminated region, which was also likely damaged.

The oil spill has also vastly accelerated the rate of coastal erosion. Plant species such as native marsh grasses and mangroves, which serve as natural anchors for the barrier islands and wetlands of the Gulf Coast, are dying off rapidly as a result of contact with crude oil and dispersants. Large sections of the coast are washing away at such a rapid rate that Cat Island, a once beautiful wild barrier island in Mississippi, has almost completely vanished. The disappearance of coastal wetlands also leaves nearby towns and cities, and above all New Orleans, completely defenseless against hurricanes, because they rely on these areas as a natural buffer against storm surges.

The ecological devastation holds economic consequences for the Gulf Coast, already one of the poorest regions in the United States. The Mississippi delta and surrounding coasts, one of the most fragile and complex ecosystems in the world, have been hit particularly hard by the spill. In Louisiana's Lake Ponchartrain Basin, oyster catches plummeted by 68 percent in average pounds per year, comparing the periods 2002-09 and 2011-13. On Louisiana public fishing grounds, the average catch dropped by 73 percent.

The $500 million provided by BP to Gulf Coast states in a public relations stunt, supposedly to restore ecological areas back to "baseline condition," instead went to the tourism industry. In one particularly egregious case, Alabama lawmakers authorized the construction of a multi-million dollar convention center to host elegant dinners. By contrast, an article in the New Orleans *Times Picayune* noted that fishermen have had to use the little settlement money they received from BP to build oyster reefs in an attempt to restore their livelihood.

The spill exposed thousands of area residents and clean-up workers to risks associated with oil fumes, particulate matter from controlled burns, toxic chemicals and heavy metals. The long-term health effects on local residents are not yet understood.

In its handling of the cleanup, BP routinely disregarded the

© World Socialist Web Site

basic personal safety of employees and contractors. In many cases, clean-up workers were denied necessary safety equipment in situations where they would be exposed to both crude oil and dispersants. Safety manuals distributed to workers contained preposterous warnings like “avoid breathing vapor” and “wear suitable clothing.”

One clean-up worker reported to *Newsweek* that she had been told the crude was “as safe as Dawn dishwashing liquid,” and had accidentally tracked it into her home with her boots. Within days, she was coughing up blood, suffering headaches, and her “throat felt like it was covered in razor blades.”

Corexit, the dispersant used in the cleanup following the spill, has also since been linked to serious health issues. A report published in 2013 by the Government Accountability Project (GAP) and the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) detailed accounts of bloody urine, heart palpitations, kidney and liver damage, migraines, skin rashes, respiratory problems, memory loss and reduced IQ amongst fishermen, clean-up workers, divers and Plaquemines Parish residents.

Despite overwhelming evidence of BP’s criminal disregard for the safety of the environment and local population, the Obama administration has shielded it from any consequences. Of the $20 billion escrow fund previously established for the payment of settlement claims by the administration, BP has only paid $5 billion. Throughout the process, BP has repeatedly attempted to block settlement payments under the pretense of “fictitious claims.”

Under “claims czar” Kenneth Feinberg, who previously headed the escrow fund, the notorious “5 percent rule” became a requirement. The rule required business claimants, most of whom were fishermen and small business owners ruined by the spill, to demonstrate a 5 percent growth in annual revenue in order to continue receiving interim payments.

In 2011, it was reported that recipients receiving a total of approximately $2 billion worth of claims were required to waive their legal right to demand further compensation. These claimants accepted settlements, many times a tiny fraction of their real losses, to forego years of litigation. This was little more than a legal gag-order foisted upon claimants at a price that did not match the economic loss they suffered as a result of the spill. Attorney Brent Coon, who represents many of the oil spill claimants, referred to the BP oil spill settlement as a “buzzard” with an “abysmal” claims payment record, which was attempting to “claw back monies from the few business claimants that have been already paid.”

A federal judge ruled in January of this year that BP’s maximum fine resulting from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill would be $13.7 billion, significantly lower than the $18 billion fine called for by prosecutors. Judge Carl Barbier ruled that 3.17 million barrels of oil were released during the incident, a figure even lower than that given by some of BP’s own witnesses.

In his determination of how much oil was released, Barbier forgave some 810,000 barrels of oil that had since been skimmed from the ocean surface and resold for profit. BP is also given legal room to further negotiate the fines due to a loophole in the Clean Water Act, which could potentially reduce BP’s total fine to a mere $9.5 billion. For a company that raked in $23 billion in profits in 2013 alone, this constitutes nothing more than a mark-up in overhead costs.

In a further endorsement of corporate thievery, Barbier ruled that BP did not worsen the impact of the spill by lying about its true extent. Actually, the Obama administration aided and abetted BP’s initial cover-up of the rate of oil flow from the damaged platform.

Mere days after Barbier’s ruling, the Obama administration opened a large section of the Atlantic coast for drilling, while expanding exploration in the Gulf of Mexico and parts of the Alaska coastline. Many proposed drilling areas are located in far deeper waters than previously explored, which acutely heightens the risk of similar disasters in the future.

When another such disaster occurs, the federal government will have no idea how to adequately respond. Jane Lubchenco, the ex-director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), stated recently that the contingency plan used by federal agencies to respond to environmental disasters of this scope has remained unchanged since the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker spill.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site