

Over 20,000 tons of diesel spilled in Russian Arctic river

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On May 29 an accident at a power plant near the northern Siberian city of Norilsk led to a massive spill that released 23,000 tons of diesel into the environment, most of which has drifted into the Ambarnaya River. It is one the greatest environmental catastrophes to ever occur in the Arctic, and is being compared to the Exxon Valdez spill of 1989, when about 39,000 tons of fuel flooded into the waters off the coast of Alaska.

The company which owns the plant, Norilsk Nickel, stated that the accident likely occurred because thawing permafrost caused an oil tank to collapse. According to Norilsk, the tank rested on 30-year-old pillars. An area of 350 sq kilometers (135 sq miles) has been contaminated. The Ambarnaya is now crimson red.

Special booms could contain the spill. However, Alexei Knizhnikov from the World Wildlife Fund Russia warned, this “doesn’t mean that toxic elements have not gotten into the water of the lake [Pyasino]. Unfortunately, the most poisonous elements of diesel fuel are aromatic compounds like benzol, toluene, ethyl benzene, xylene, which will massively mix with water. It is impossible to collect them using oil booms.”

Environmental groups have noted that cleaning up the spill is difficult because of its scale and the geography of the river, which is located in a remote and swampy area. According to Oleg Mitvoi, the former deputy head of Russia’s environmental agency Rosprirodnadzor, there has “never been such an accident in the Arctic zone”. The clean-up, he said, could take between five and ten years, and cost up to \$1.5 billion.

The criminally slow response by both the company Norilsk Nickel and regional authorities has dramatically amplified the scale of the disaster.

Even though the catastrophe occurred on May 29, regional authorities did not take any action until two days later on May 31, when images of the spill had spread on social media. Authorities claimed that they were not

aware of the incident until oil oozed onto a highway, causing a car to catch fire.

Sergey Verkhovets from Greenpeace Russia said that in the case of such a catastrophe two days is “a very long time.” He also stated that the company had been reckless in its exploitation of natural resources under conditions where thawing permafrost—a result of global warming—has dramatically transformed the ecological landscape.

Verkhovets warned that the impact of the oil spill would be felt for “many years to come”, further polluting the already damaged water systems in the region. The indigenous population, which depends on these rivers for its livelihood, will be particularly impacted.

“We are talking about dead fish, polluted plumage of birds and poisoned animals”, he said. Authorities have assured the population that the oil has not polluted the ground water, but whether this is true or not is far from certain. About 175,000 people live in the nearby city of Norilsk.

On June 3, Russian president Vladimir Putin, in a highly-staged televised address, chided the company and declared a federal state of emergency. A federal investigation was initiated and state television made a point of showing the foreman at the power plant being led off to jail in handcuffs. He is being made the main scapegoat of the disaster, and is being charged for violating environmental protection rules. He may face up to five years in prison.

In reality, however, it is the government and Norilsk Nickel that bear primary responsibility.

Norilsk Nickel is one of the largest producers of nickel, platinum and copper in the world, and one of the most influential and valuable in Russia. The multi-billion state-owned company has been at the center of intense struggles between Russian oligarchs since the destruction of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism. It is now headed by Vladimir Potanin, who is worth over \$25

billion, and is close to President Vladimir Putin. In a statement on Friday, Potanin claimed the company would pay for the clean-up of the disaster.

Environmental protection regulations in Russia are notoriously poor, and systematic violations by companies are routinely overlooked by state authorities. Four years ago, an accident at another plant of Norilsk Nickel in the region resulted in an oil spill that turned another river red and transformed an area twice the size of Rhode Island into a “dead zone.” The company was fined less than \$1,000, which made clear signal that it had nothing to fear in case of future disasters.

The catastrophe on the Ambarnaya underlies the dangers bound up with the “new scramble for the Arctic” by the major powers and corporations. Rapidly warming temperatures have made the exploitation of raw material resources in the region much more dangerous from an environmental standpoint, but also more alluring for major corporations.

At the same time, the Arctic, which is of major economic and geostrategic significance to Russia, has become a central arena of the US imperialist drive to encircle Russia. This further heightens the danger of military and environmental catastrophes.

As part of the standoff with the US, Russia launched a floating nuclear power plant in the Arctic Sea late last summer. The ship has been called a “nuclear Titanic” and “floating Chernobyl” by environmental groups that warn of the potentially catastrophic consequences of any accident on board. Just a few months before the launching of the floating nuclear power plant, a fire on a Russian nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea killed 14 high-ranking Russian navy officers. An aide to the commander of Russia’s navy later ominously warned that, “With their lives, they saved the lives of their colleagues, saved the vessel and prevented a planetary catastrophe.”



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