

Beached Japanese cargo ship causes ecological disaster for Mauritius

Tom Casey
14 August 2020

On July 25, the MV Wakashio, a freight vessel owned by the Japanese firm Okiyo Maritime Corp., a subsidiary of Nagashiki Shipping Co. Ltd., collided with a coral reef barrier near the southern coast of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. Nearly two weeks later, on August 6, the vessel began to leak approximately a thousand metric tons of its fuel into the surrounding waters. This week, as the spill grew from covering 3.3 km² to 27 km², the Mauritian government claims to have successfully pumped 3,000 of the remaining 4,000 tons of fuel from the ship's hold.

The spill will have a devastating impact on the surrounding area's incredibly biodiverse ecology. The vessel ran aground approximately a mile off the coast of the Île aux Aigrettes (Egrets Island) and the Pointé D'Esny Wetland. The former is home to a large number of rare and endangered wildlife and includes the world's only remaining patch of Mauritian dry coastal forest. This particular terrain is hypothesized by scientists to have been the preferred habitat of the now extinct species that was native only to this exact region of the world—the dodo bird.

Pointé D'Esny Wetland was established in 2001 as an area covered under the Ramsar Convention, which is also known as the convention on “Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat.” In 2017, when the Ramsar Convention's leadership partnered with United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) World Heritage Center (WHC), the area became an officially protected site by the two conventions.

The fuel leak also threatens the Mahébourg fishing reserve, which lies barely a few miles to the north of the grounded freighter. Happy Khambule, the senior climate and energy campaign manager for Greenpeace Africa, stated that “[t]housands of species around the

pristine lagoons of Blue Bay, Pointe d'Esny and Mahebourg are at risk of drowning in a sea of pollution, with dire consequences for Mauritius' economy, food security, and health.”

On August 7, the Mauritian government under Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth (Militant Socialist Movement/MSM) declared a state of emergency and requested international assistance. The administration then mobilized the country's National Coast Guard (NCG) as well as the assistance of Polyeco, a privately held waste management firm based in Greece. French President Emmanuel Macron issued a tweet of support for the Jugnauth government and announced that that France would be deploying “teams and equipment,” which would consist of both from military and civilian personnel from the nearby French overseas department and region of Réunion.

The Greenpeace International senior portfolio manager and former environmental advisor to the Mauritian Prime Minister Mokshanand Sunil Dowarkasing (MSM) announced that the cleanup involved removing the remaining fuel from the vessel while avoiding breaking vessel in half, which could result in the further release of the toxic liquid.

Like many shipping vessels, the MV Wakashio was registered in a country unrelated to its owners, in this case Panama. Shipping lines shop around for countries with looser regulations in a system referred to as “flags of convenience.” This enables them to pay lower wages, provide worse accommodations for their crew, and cut corners on maintenance. In 2019, ships registered to Panama accounted for 30 percent of all ships detained for failing port inspections across the Indian Ocean.

The disaster has sparked widespread concern by the Mauritian population. As a measure of this outpouring,

a public Facebook group of more than 40,000 members was created specifically for the purpose of civilian volunteers to coordinate cleanup activities. There have been many reports of Mauritians of all ages donating locks of their hair to be used for the absorption of the leaked fuel.

In the wake of the recent July 11 protests against the Jugnauth administration, the popular concern for the environmental impact of the fuel spill has also taken on a broad anti-government character. As the WWSW reported, last month's demonstrations were held in response to the savage austerity policies that were carried out in the name of protecting the Mauritian population against COVID-19. Jugnauth has also received bitter criticism over his handling of the situation facing its thousands of stranded maritime workers who have spent months waiting to be returned from marooned vessels around the world. The government was widely denounced by workers for implementing exorbitant repatriation fees as a boon for its major tourism companies.

A Mauritian worker, in a statement given anonymously to the WWSW for fear of retaliation by the state, denounced the role of the Jugnauth administration in the handling of the MV Wakashio disaster. "I think our government is at fault, completely. The NCG was aware that there was a potential problem, and while they were in a position to do something about it, they didn't take any action."

Referring to the exclusion of local Mauritian news outlets at Jugnauth's press conferences which were recently held in Blue Bay, a coastal area close to the spill, the worker continued, "our Prime Minister is acting like a dictator now. All of the civil servants are his own men—the police commissioner, the law, and the speaker in parliament. Many Mauritians really want Jugnauth to resign."

The worker also denounced the administration's recent crackdown on free speech, which has included the April 15 arrest of Rachna Seenauth, a former assistant to the Mauritian president, for creating a social media post that satirized the Jugnauth government. "They have agents all over the internet just to patrol social media. If you post something that the Prime Minister doesn't like, he'll send the police to arrest you without any warrant. Just imagine. ..."

Sunday's *Forbes* article, in which its author

practically salivates over what he doubtlessly views as potentially profitable solutions to global environmental shipping crises, makes clear that American business views such events not as crimes against the quality and safety of human life, but rather as opportunities to wrench profits from untapped markets. "Whilst the technological revolution in favor of sustainability is being led by many innovative technology companies, policy making lags far behind. The disaster in Mauritius shows there is a need for...(t)he creation of a global 'Ocean Mission Control' to support local authorities around the world, particularly in poorer countries who would otherwise lack critical scale to access such resources. The governance of such a resource will need to be more akin to an agile, purpose-driven Silicon Valley startup than traditional international structures."

While Mauritian workers correctly oppose the blatant corruption of the Jugnauth government and the business interests it represents, they should be wary of attempts to channel their opposition behind both national and imperialist capitalist drives to profit from the Wakashio ecological disaster. There exists no genuine contingency for democratic rights or environmental protection among the political representatives of the Mauritian bourgeoisie, nor among the international capitalist class.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact