

The profit system and the BP oil catastrophe

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As oil from the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico began to wash ashore in large quantities, the Obama administration reiterated its confidence in the giant oil company. Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen, the lead official in the oil pollution crisis, said BP had the necessary technical knowledge. Referring to the company's CEO, Allen said, "I trust Tony Hayward. When I talk to him, I get an answer."

Appearing on CNN's "State of the Union" program on Sunday, Allen was asked why the federal government did not take over the effort to cap the well and block the flow of oil, which BP has failed to do for the past month. He replied, "What makes this an unprecedented anomalous event is access to the discharge site is controlled by the technology that was used for the drilling, which is owned by the private sector. They have the eyes and ears that are down there. They are necessarily the modality by which this is going to get solved."

In other words, the fate of the Gulf Coast, and the millions of people who depend on the Gulf for their livelihood in fishing, boating, tourism and other occupations, are all to be subordinated to the profit interests of the giant multinational oil company. The private sector controls the technology, and that control cannot be challenged.

There are many practical grounds to question the US government claim that "BP knows best." BP did not drill the well. It hired contractors, like Transocean and Halliburton, to do the job for it. Nor, judging by the experience of the past month, does BP possess either the technical knowledge or the engineering skill to cap the colossal oil leak.

It is certainly clear that there were no serious preparations made for a disaster on the scale of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, even though both environmentalists and industry technical personnel had made serious warnings about the dangers of drilling in

the deep waters of the Gulf, more than a mile below the surface.

According to a lengthy analysis posted Sunday on the web site of the *Wall Street Journal*, "executives, government officials, and scientists are learning as they go, even though the industry has been drilling in the Gulf for decades and has 77 rigs operating there..."

This lack of preparation extended to many agencies of the federal government, which are under the effective control of the industries they supposedly regulate. The Environmental Protection Agency was "still assessing" the ecological effect of the chemical dispersants being sprayed on the Gulf, because it never funded the necessary research. The scientific instruments being used to measure the spill and its impact are inadequate to the purpose. Even the maps used to identify the most vulnerable coastal areas are more than a decade out of date because of budget cuts at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

In the post-disaster response, it is clear that the company's financial interests, not the ever-expanding environmental destruction, have been the driving force. Critics have pointed out that the procedure being employed this week to cap the well could have been attempted much earlier. It appears that the company did not do so because it hoped that a less drastic approach would make it possible to restore production from what is manifestly a huge pool of oil.

Financial concerns also dictated the company's approach to containing the damage from the spill. BP initially released lowball estimates of the quantity of oil escaping from the Deepwater Horizon site, delaying the efforts to protect sensitive wetlands like the Mississippi delta region of Louisiana.

The company also stalled proposals to build artificial berms to protect Louisiana's barrier islands, because of the enormous cost of moving so many tons of sand.

Now it is too late. And on Grand Isle, Louisiana, 40 boom-laying boats hired by BP were sitting idle at the dock as oil began coming ashore on beaches Saturday night. A local government official had to commandeer them for emergency use.

When the EPA belatedly reversed its approval for the massive spraying of chemical dispersants, and told BP to switch to chemicals less toxic than the Corexit 9500 it had been using, the company simply refused. BP's main concern in the use of dispersants is cosmetic: it wanted to keep the vast quantities of oil emerging from the Deepwater Horizon site from reaching the surface, where the damage would be immediately visible, and used the chemicals to keep the bulk of the oil under water, with incalculable consequences for the undersea environment.

In response to the mounting popular outrage over the Gulf oil disaster, the Obama administration has begun to posture as critics of BP. Obama appeared before the press at the White House Friday for another phony expression of "anger" at the delay in capping the leak, and he devoted his Saturday radio and Internet speech to the question as well, announcing the appointment of the inevitable blue-ribbon commission to investigate the disaster, headed by retired Democratic senator Robert Graham and Republican former EPA administrator William Reilly.

A battalion of top officials has returned to the Gulf Coast to pose for the television cameras in a display of "action" against the oil spill. One of these, Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, visited the BP emergency headquarters in Houston and declared afterwards, "I have no question that BP is throwing everything at the problem to try to resolve it because this is an existential crisis for one of the world's largest companies."

Asked whether he had confidence that the company knew what it was doing, Salazar replied, "No, not completely." He then added, "If we find that they're not doing what they're supposed to be doing, we'll push them out of the way." It is hard to top that statement for its combination of cluelessness and complacency.

The Obama administration has absolutely no intention of "pushing BP out of the way," not because of the company's supposedly unique technical resources and expertise, but because the Democratic Party, like the Republican Party, is a political

instrument of big business. It defends the profit interests of corporate America and the "right" of the giant corporations to monopoly control over the means of production created by generations of human labor—even when it means the destruction of human life and the environment.

In his statement announcing the blue-ribbon commission, Obama blamed the oil disaster on the corporations involved, calling it "a breakdown of responsibility on the part of BP and perhaps others, including Transocean and Halliburton." He declared, "we will continue to hold the relevant companies accountable."

Genuine accountability, however, is impossible when the criminal controls the scene of the crime. The top officials of BP and its corporate accomplices should be subject to arrest and prosecution, and the assets of these companies should be seized to pay for the damages. Their huge resources must be placed under public control. This alone can ensure that the response to this disaster is directed not at defending the profit interests of the oil bosses, but at preserving the livelihood of millions of working people and the very existence of a large portion of the natural environment of the Gulf Coast.

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