

# Crime on the High Seas: The “Deepwater Horizon” Oil Rig Disaster

by  
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An environmental disaster is spreading through the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, there was an explosion and then a fire on the deepwater oil drilling rig the “Deepwater Horizon” operated by Transocean Ltd. under contract from British Petroleum (BP). Eleven workers lost their lives in the explosion. The rig then capsized and sank and oil started pouring out of the well, which is nearly one mile deep. BP and their public relations agent – the US government – estimate that some 5,000 barrels daily are polluting the ocean. Some scientists estimate the rate at between 25,000 to 80,000 barrels per day.



reopen and exploit the well at a later date.

## “Free” Market

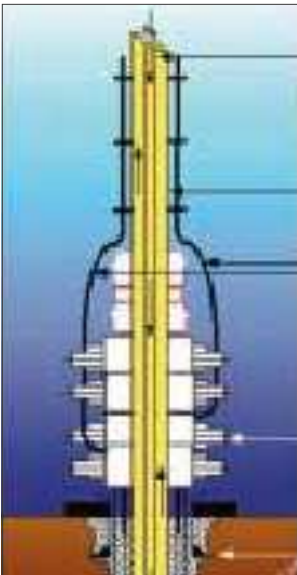
From its very start, this entire calamity was caused by the basic laws of motion of capitalism, itself, and exacerbated by the “free” market policies that are so prevalent today.

BP leased the rig and its operation from Transocean Ltd., one of the world’s largest deep-water operators of oil-drilling companies. That particular well was going to be the world’s deepest. Considered an ocean vessel, the rig was flagged from the Marshall Islands and had many workers from the underdeveloped world. As such, they were not given proper training for just such emergencies. The plan was to drill the well, plug it with cement, and then move on, and BP was going to

## Cutting Corners on Safety

Wells such as this one are lined with concrete, which must be allowed to set for a certain amount of time. During the drilling procedure, a heavy fluid known as “mud” is pumped into the bore hole. This is pumped out and sea water allowed in when the drilling is finished. Normally, the cement plugs are set prior to that procedure. This is because in case gas enters the well, the heavier mud will prevent the gas from rising to the surface until the cement plugs sets. In this case, presumably in order to save money (the operation was costing BP \$1 million per day), the mud was replaced with sea water prior to plugging the well.

Halliburton, which was responsible for setting this plug, claims that it requested permission from the



**A Blow Out Preventer**  
*There should have been two of these.*

Minerals Management Services (MMS – the federal agency responsible for regulating the industry), but no reply has been found at this time. Whether they actually requested this permission is still not certain. In any case, even prior to this, they are supposed to “pressure test” the well. This involves checking the pressure within the well. If it fluctuates, this is an indication that gas is leaking into it and measures should be taken to halt this before the mud is removed. In this case, the test revealed that pressure

was mounting, but BP decided not to run a second test to confirm these results. Instead, less than two hours before the explosion, they decided to proceed to remove the mud.

CBS’s news show “60 Minutes” (5-16-10) interviewed a former worker on the rig, Mike Williams. According to Williams, the entire procedure was running some three weeks over schedule, costing BP some \$21 million. Several weeks before the disaster, a worker accidentally caused an action which apparently ruptured a key seal in the blow out preventer. Bits of rubber started appearing at the top of the well, but Transocean, under pressure from BP, decided to keep on going. Williams then said that the first sign that something was going wrong came when engines on the rig started speeding up – presumably because they were burning the methane gas as well as their regular fuel. A few minutes after that, the massive explosion occurred.



Some five or more privately owned and operated fire boats spent hours pouring water on the burning rig. There was neither coordination nor planning in this effort and after some hours, having taken on tons and tons of water, the rig turned over and sank.

Once the rig sank, oil started to pour out. A “blow-out

preventer” was supposed to shear off the well pipe at its head, thus sealing it. This preventer, operating 6,000 feet below sea level, didn’t function. There are several guesses as to why, including a dead battery, a broken seal in the preventer, and other known malfunctioning parts. Most likely any one of these problems could have caused its malfunction. Some other countries require the use of two such preventers, but not the free-market champion US regime. At \$500,000, they cost too much, according to the MMS.

Thus did this series of corner-cutting in safety and criminal neglect as well as simple lack of coordination lead to a huge disaster.

As of mid-May, those responsible for dealing with this disaster have poured some 400,000 gallons of oil dispersant on the oil. This chemical, itself, apparently is toxic to sea life, but no matter. It will help BP cover up its crimes since it will leave less oil slick hitting the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

### **BP’s Dirty History**

BP also apparently leads the industry in dirty work place practices. In 2005, a fire at a BP refinery in Texas killed 15 employees there. One year later, a BP pipeline in Alaska sprung a bad oil leak after BP had been warned about corrosion of its pipelines there. According to a letter warning about BP practices sent by US congressman Henry Waxman, Between September 2008 and November 2009, three BP gas and oil pipelines on Alaska’s North Slope ruptured or clogged, leading to a risk of explosions. A potentially cataclysmic explosion was also avoided at a BP gas compressor plant, where a key piece of equipment designed to prevent the buildup of gas failed to operate, and the backup equipment intended to warn workers was not properly installed.

On April 27, one week after the disastrous fire, BP announced strong profits. According to a banking analyst report, the company benefited from having cut some 5,000 jobs and saving \$4 billion in operating expenses, which partially accounts for its first quarter profits of \$6 billion.

### **Corporate Control Over Politics**

The MMS also bears responsibility. According to the Wall St. Journal (May 7, 2010), “In 2000, the MMS issued a safety alert saying it expects oil companies to



have a backup system to activate blowout preventers if the main activation system fails. A spokesman for MMS says it relied on industry assurances that backup systems were in place, but did no formal survey. Last June, nine years after the safety alert, the MMS issued an almost identical safety notice, but to date has issued no rule requiring the back-up switches.”

Basically, what the MMS was doing was covering for themselves by sending out a notice while not enforcing anything.

Typical of all government regulatory bodies, the MMS operates largely as an industry-owned subsidiary. MMS regulators have been disciplined for accepting “gifts” from the oil industry as well as for having sex with industry “representatives” (i.e., industry-hired prostitutes).

In addition, BP has spent millions of dollars lobbying (i.e. bribing) the US congress, including \$15.9 million last year alone. On May 14, President Obama blasted the “cozy” relationship between BP and federal authorities. What he failed to mention was that during his time as a Senator, he was the single largest recipient of BP’s generosity. (source: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0510/36783.html>).

On top of all the legalized bribing and criminal neglect by BP, the underlying reason for the seriousness of this disaster is the extreme depth of this well – set to be the deepest ever - which makes it so difficult to seal off the well. This means that other, similar disasters are simply waiting to happen.

### Deep Water Wells, Peak Oil & Capitalism

The reason for this increased exploration in hard-to-reach places like the deep sea is the peaking of oil supplies. World oil discoveries peaked in the 1960s, but oil demand has steadily increased. And today, the world consumes about four times the amount that is



**BP's Dirty History** - BP's Texas refinery fire in 2005 that killed over a dozen workers. BP was found criminally guilty for this fire.

newly discovered. Thus, we see the phenomenon of the “picking of low hanging fruit first.” In other words, the easier to reach oil wells are in the process of depletion, and there is very little more of such deposits on the Earth, so now they are forced to go after the harder-to-reach deposits. What will happen when those are depleted is never a thought by the capitalist class.

This fact is the perfect example of the anarchy of the capitalist means of

production. Under capitalism, if one oil company doesn't deplete oil supplies, its competitor will. If one company spends money in new energy sources, it will be overwhelmed by its competitors. Therefore, capitalism is incapable of any sort of long-range planning, such as planning to replace fossil oil as the principle energy source. It just stumbles along from one sort of crisis to another.

### Future Disasters

This disaster is just a forewarning of the future, as capitalism now increases the use of coal, tar sands, and nuclear energy. As far as the world's oceans and seas are concerned, this and coming oil spills will add to policies that are coming close to turning these waters into largely dead bodies. Already, coral reefs are dying around the world, 90% of the world's large fish stocks are largely eliminated, huge algae



**Ocean Die-Off due to algal bloom** - this will become increasingly common as capitalism destroys the oceans.



**BP CEO Tony Hayward**

*The workers movement should demand that he and his co-conspirators be imprisoned for life for criminal conspiracy, manslaughter, and crimes against the planet.*

growths are spreading. These will have disastrous affects on the entire planet. Meanwhile, the overwhelming majority of the non-governmental organizations who raise money based on the environmental crisis sit down at the table with the corporate criminals and their representatives to discuss what minor details can be reformed. And the leadership of the labor movement in the US completely ignores this looming disaster and continues to throw its support behind the corporate-controlled Democratic Party.

until that moment they had gotten away with all their cost-cutting and unsafe practices and no serious accidents had yet happened. None of these executives numbered amongst the eleven killed. It may be forgiven if people feel that this is unfortunate.

#### **Program to Deal With This Crime**

- **For the workers' movement to demand that the oil corporate criminals be tried for criminal conspiracy, manslaughter, and crimes against the planet.**
- **Globally coordinated workers' movement and a mass workers' party.**
- **Put the entire oil and related industries under public ownership, to be controlled and managed by the workers in the industry and the consumers.**
- **For a global plan for safe, renewable energy production to replace fossil fuels.**
- **For a global economy run based on people's and the planet's needs, not corporate profit and a state democratically run by workers, not the corporations.**

At the very moment that the explosion occurred on the Deepwater Horizon, BP executives were celebrating on its decks. They were celebrating the fact that up