When you stick your finger into one of the orange-brown or black, asphalt-smelling globs of oil now washing into the wetlands where the Mississippi Delta meets the Gulf of Mexico, it just gloms on and sticks. It's hard to get off. You see it stuck to the stalks of the roso-cane reeds, which hold the wetlands in place. Then you start thinking about what happens when a fish, a bird, or some other creature gets caught in this toxic stew. And you think about how these pools are only the first, small waves of oil from the exploded wellhead of British Petroleum's "Deepwater Horizon." And you just can't take it.

The Gulf oil spill is an almost immeasurable environmental crime, an immense catastrophe seemingly without end. Vast marine areas are becoming polluted and clogged with oil, causing largely unseen havoc. Much larger regions in the sea, near shore and on land are threatened. Most of the devastation this spill is causing is unseen—out in the marine ecosystems of the Gulf. In recent days more of the oil has begun to hit land. This is beginning to bring home the reality of the immense scope of this disaster to many people who had previously been fervently hoping against hope that the worst wouldn't happen.

Oil has now washed into the Chandeleur Islands—a breeding ground for brown pelicans and shorebirds. Hundreds of dead fish and hermit crabs have been found in oil-contaminated waters.
and marshes east and west of the Mississippi Delta. Some pockets of the Delta marshlands themselves, the center of a vast and rich ecosystem with deep connections to the life of the entire Gulf—have also been hit with oil in some places.

We saw this on May 20 when we went by boat into the Pass a Loutre area of the Delta, about 10 miles out from Venice, the southern-most town in Louisiana. Fishermen here are deeply anguished—one told us he cried for the first time in years thinking of the possible destruction of a "way of life," and an area that supplies 30 percent of the seafood people consume in the U.S. We rode by at least a mile of coastal salt marshland with cane grasses soaked in orange-brown oil, with oil sheen on the water and clumps and blotches of oil mixed in. The booms and absorbent pads the government claims will protect the wetlands were either non-existent or sat ineffectually, sometimes floating back and forth in the current, in front of canes soaked in oil.

If the cane and other grasses get saturated and oil penetrates to their roots they will die, and this whole ecosystem will be done. The marshes, already disappearing, can literally be washed away. These areas are breeding grounds for fish, crabs, many fish species, marshland birds and many other species. The marshes, bays and estuaries are the centers generating life for the entire Gulf.

All this is criminal. And it's a sharp expression—and escalation—of how the system is endangering the planet's environment and imperiling human destiny. It's part of the global environmental emergency we face.

A Capitalist Environmental Catastrophe

There is a profound environmental, economic, and political crisis unfolding in the Gulf. It threatens to wreak havoc with the lives of millions, destroy an ecologically rich region that is a key link in the food chain that hundreds of millions depend on, and do enormous environmental damage. BP and government officials and agencies from Obama down are trying to assure people they're on top of the situation, and doing all that's possible to stop the oil geyser and protect the environment. The authorities have been downplaying the extent of the disaster from the beginning, including because they don't want any questioning of their basic plan to go ahead with the highly risky deepwater offshore drilling that is so central to their energy program and they don't want people to start to call into question their "legitimacy" to govern. But they're not fully in control of events.

They are portraying the crisis as being the result of "accidents," "mistakes" or "corruption" of some low-level officials. Yet each day, new exposures reveal that it's the entire capitalist-imperialist system that created this disaster, that has proven an utter failure in responding to it, and that is not capable of protecting the earth's ecosystems.
Global capitalism is structured around, and fueled by the extraction of fossil fuels like oil, coal and natural gas—of the 10 largest companies in the world in 2007, six were oil companies and three were car companies. It is both enormously profitable—for the whole system, not just oil companies—and central to the whole way contemporary capitalism works. U.S. global imperial power depends on control of massive global energy reserves—in order to shape the global economy and control all who depend on oil (one reason the U.S. has hundreds of thousands of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan). The U.S. military runs on fossil fuels. There is fierce global competition for control of these resources. That's why the U.S. and other big powers are determined to drill for oil and gas regardless of the well-documented dangers. Since 2009, the Obama administration has "approved 3 huge lease sales, 103 seismic blasting projects, 346 drilling plans." (New York Times, May 14, 2010)

Nothing Obama or Congress have done since the April 20 explosion of BP's drilling platform—the grandstanding, the finger-pointing, the resignation of an official or two, the investigative commissions and agency reorganizations—have touched anything fundamental about the capitalist system's addiction to fossil fuels, and its compulsion to "drill, baby, drill."

**The System's Cover-up and Attack on Scientists—Lying About the Size of the Oil Blowout**

They've lied about the size of the gusher coming up from BP's blowout wellhead—which is crucial to assessing the enormity of the crisis and dealing with it. BP initially claimed that 1,000 barrels (42,000 gallons) were coming out a day. Then the estimate was raised to 5,000 barrels a day. BP and U.S. officials dismissed demands by scientists for more data on the size of the spill. Finally, some three weeks after the disaster BP was forced to release a brief video of the oil gushing out of the broken wellhead. (This video had been available but kept secret by BP and the Obama administration.) It soon became clear why it had been suppressed. A number of scientists quickly analyzed the flow rate using methods more accurate than BP's and found that BP and the government's claim was ridiculously low—5, 10, even 15 times too low.

And BP (with U.S. government backing) continues to refuse scientists access to the drilling platform and all their information. Scientists from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts with such expertise recently offered to fly to Louisiana to measure the gusher, one saying that if BP and the government can't get good numbers "the whole world is ready to help them." BP turned them down.

It also gives lie to BP's claim that it's making progress capping the well. Their latest "fix" is a
4-inch pipe they call a "Riser Insertion Tube Tool" inserted on May 16 into the 21-inch pipe coming out of the wellhead. By BP's estimates, this pipe is capturing 3,000 to 5,000 barrels a day. This might seem successful if BP's figures were to be believed—but as little as 5 percent of the oil may be being captured. (On May 20, as oil continued to pour into the Gulf, BP admitted its "estimate" may be too low.)

The Cover-up of Environmental and Health Impacts

This is one of the worst environmental catastrophes in history, yet there is absolutely no systematic round-up of where oil is making landfall. There is more on this available from the citizen group Louisiana Bucket Brigade (www.labucketbrigade.org), which receives and then verifies reports from people, than from all these government agencies combined.

Oil is pouring out 5,000 feet below the Gulf and then rising, so it is being mixed with water, becoming "emulsified." It's getting hit by the 517,000 gallons of chemical "dispersants" sprayed by BP and the Coast Guard to break it up. These dispersants are themselves toxic. Use of dispersants seems to be contributing to huge amounts of the oil staying under the surface, even creating giant plumes floating in as far as 4,200 feet deep.

Websites from government agencies in charge tracking and responding to this disaster—NOAA, the Interior Department, and the EPA—are filled with glowing reports of how hard they are working, how many miles of boom have been laid, how many responders have been mobilized, and how air quality, water and sediments checks indicate there's no threat. In reality these are attempts to keep people passive and maintain the illusion the danger is not that great.

Marine biologists have repeatedly warned of potentially devastating consequences to fragile ecosystems in Florida's keys, Everglades and coral reefs, and to Cuba and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, if oil enters the Loop current. Yet the head of one of the main governmental agencies in charge of responding to the disaster, Jane Lubchenco of NOAA, stated that such consequences would be "highly unlikely," claiming without any basis that the oil would be diluted and degraded and pose "minimal risk" to ecosystems. Last week scientists on the research boat MV Pelican reported discovering "giant plumes of oil in the Gulf"—huge underwater masses of oil 2,400-4,200 feet deep, some 10 miles long, 3 miles wide, and 300 feet thick in places.

The Pelican scientists found lower than normal oxygen levels in these areas, spurring worry among that the plumes could cause spreading dead zones in the Gulf. Lubchenco attacked these findings as "misleading, premature and, in some cases, inaccurate."

Ian MacDonald, an oceanographer with Florida State University, who has been speaking out to
counter BP and the government's underestimation of the spill's size stated, "not only is nobody listening to us in this, but it seems like they really want us to shut up...It's very, very punitive and anybody who is doing this is getting attacked by NOAA."

Other scientists have condemned the administration's utter failure to scientifically assess the size and impact of the spill.

**Ecosystem and Human Health Impacts**

One outrageous and maddening fact is the almost total lack of any systematic picture by any of the agencies "in charge" that details the impact the spill is already having on wildlife and species. Instead one has to comb through news articles and websites. It is known that 156 sea turtles have been found dead, 3 times the normal average. A dozen bottle-nosed dolphins and 23 oiled birds have been found dead. Rowan Gould, head of the Fisheries and Wildlife Service, said, "It's important to note that the visibly oiled birds are a small part" of the spill's impacts. "What concerns us most is what we can't see."

This is all horribly saddening and also enraging. This is an ongoing crime for which this whole system is responsible. It is the latest assault and an escalation in the environmental emergency and the destruction of the ocean and wetland ecosystems by capitalism. It should fuel us to both take the level of opposition and resistance to this spill and the system that caused it to another level, and to widely bring people to see how this whole system is responsible and that we can do much, much better.

The political terrain here is complex and changing, something we'll be reporting on in the future. The oil remains mainly offshore, so the full impact can't yet be seen. All this must be more thoroughly broken through on, with exposure and mass resistance.

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