

'Big Oil' cuts corners on safety to boost profits

A PRELIMINARY REPORT by the US National Commission (set up by president Barack Obama following the fatal Deepwater horizon oil rig blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico last April) has accused three companies - BP, Transocean and Halliburton - of cutting corners over safety in order to cut costs ie to boost profits.

Ironically, this finding has helped boost a recovery in BP's share price which had collapsed by more than half in June 2010 following the blow-out and oil spill.

This is because the report identifies critical mistakes made by BP but also its contractors Halliburton (which cemented the well) and Transocean (which ran the Deepwater Horizon rig). BP shareholders are no doubt hoping that spreading the blame for the disaster will reduce BP's financial liabilities.

The commission also criticised the failings of the former offshore regulator, the Minerals Management Service, for being 'hopelessly inadequate'. This is a mild rebuke. It is common knowledge that MMS's cosy relationship with big oil amounted to the regulator 'rubber stamping' the ridiculously flawed safety plans of the industry.

For instance, just four days before the 20 April explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig, BP asked the MMS for permission to alter its plan for the Macondo oil well "in a way that was potentially in breach of regulations. After just 90 minutes, the MMS official approved the request." (FT 7/1/11).

It remains to be seen whether the MMS's successor - the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement - performs any better. But even before the les-



A devastating explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig killed eleven workers and caused widespread pollution.

sions of 'the greatest environmental disaster in (human) history in the US' are learnt, president Obama, last October, lifted a six month moratorium banning deepwater drilling off the US coast.

Profits

WITH A Republican majority in the House of Representatives (following last November's mid-term congressional elections) the American Petroleum Institute, which represents leading oil and gas companies in the US, has renewed its call for increased offshore drilling.

Big oil has additional cause to celebrate as the UK parliamentary Energy and Climate Change Committee of MPs also decided recently not to impose a moratorium on the de-

velopment of 100 or so deep water oil sites in the North Sea - notwithstanding its own concerns about the lack of safety contingency plans in the industry.

Only four months before the Macondo well in the Gulf of Mexico blew up Transocean narrowly avoided a similar catastrophe occurring in the North Sea. Despite a warning advisory note being circulated it seems that no-one aboard the Deepwater Horizon rig saw it.

With oil prices hovering around \$100 a barrel there are huge profits to be made by big oil. The privately-owned oil industry, with its insatiable drive to maximise profits, will continue to cut corners on safety thereby risking more workers' lives and widespread environmental pollution.

With capitalist politicians seemingly in the pockets of big oil, only socialist nationalisation of the energy industry can ensure effective safety over oil and gas production.

Moreover, only through a democratic socialist plan of production could viable, green alternative energy sources such as wind, wave and solar power be developed to meet society's needs.

●Tory shipping minister Mike Penning has overturned a previous all-party ban to allow the potentially dangerous practice of ship-to-ship oil transfers (typically by Russian tankers) off the Suffolk coastal town of Southwold - an area of outstanding beauty and bird sanctuaries.

Councils ramp up service charges

COUNCILS ARE massively increasing charges to residents - aside from hefty council tax increases - for providing local services. These increases are an attempt to make up part of the huge funding shortfall that many councils are experiencing as a result of the coalition cuts in central government grants.

Increased charges include; paying more for home help and meals on wheels, ending the provision of free nurseries, massive hikes in hire charges in sport centres, extending parking charges to cover weekends, and even increasing the cost of burial plots.

Disingenuously, the government response has been to argue that such increases shouldn't be made to offset higher executive salaries or to avoid making 'efficiency savings'.

The government's tut-tutting about these increased charges conveniently dodges the fact that council workers' pay is being frozen for yet another year along with huge job cuts and a worsening of workers' employment conditions. It also sidesteps the inconvenient truth that billions of pounds of central government cuts in council funding is devastating local services.

Of course these charges and cuts can and must be resisted. Trade unions in councils such as in Birmingham have been fighting savage cuts with industrial action.

However, Labour-run authorities, while wringing their hands over the cuts, are meekly capitulating to government demands instead of putting up a fight alongside the workers and local communities they are supposed to represent.

Campaigners tell PM: 'No to Royal Mail privatisation'

ON SUNDAY 9 January, 1,000 people turned up in Witney, prime minister David Cameron's Oxfordshire constituency, to demonstrate against the privatisation of the Royal Mail.

Steve Bell

After a march through the town there was a short rally at which the most memorable speakers were Billy Hayes, Communications Workers' Union (CWU) general secretary, Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary, and two young people from Witney protesting against youth service closures in Oxfordshire.

Both Billy and Dave emphasised the need to widen the struggle and spoke of industrial action to protect jobs and services and to defeat the Tory cuts, whilst those campaigning to save the youth service spoke about the need to oppose all cuts in services. Critical questions were raised of the Labour Party policy by Dave.

A Buckinghamshire Unison health branch spokesperson raised the Medirest cleaners' dispute and pointed out that where the trade unions provide a fighting lead then previously unorganised workers will take action, sometimes within only a few months of joining a union.

Health activists and Socialist Party members collected over £300 for the Medirest hardship fund.

●More than one-third of all Post Office's could close as a result of the Con-Dem coalition's privatisation of Royal Mail. Currently, a Royal Mail inter-business subsidy keeps 4,400 Post Office branches open. However, this £343 million subsidy to Post Office Limited, which runs 11,900 branches, could end. Under the previous Labour government some 6,000 branches across Britain were closed.



Police moles attempt to discredit protest movements

THE TRIAL of six environmental activists, accused of conspiring to break into Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, has collapsed after the defence demanded information about a police agent provocateur who it appears was one of the main people planning to break into the coal-fired power station.

Naomi Byron

Police officer Mark Kennedy began infiltrating environmental groups in 2003, and apparently only confessed to working undercover for the police when confronted with a passport in his real name in October last year.

According to the Guardian, Mark Kennedy paid £778 to hire a 7.5 tonne truck to transport equipment for the Ratcliffe power station action, and admitted to the activists who confronted him that undercover police infiltrating protest movements cost the taxpayer £250,000 each a year.

How much public money is being wasted on agents provocateurs trying to twist and criminalise legitimate protest movements?

Warning

THIS IS a timely warning for the growing anti-cuts movement. The police and the state will be looking for ways to infiltrate and discredit anti-cuts campaigners, including sending agents provocateurs to demonstrations and meetings.

Fortunately some of the most effective methods of organising campaigns - like democratic discussion about strategy and tactics, and keeping individual activists or members accountable to the group - are also the best defence against police infiltration as well as individuals getting carried away and doing things that harm the movement.

The student demonstrators who attempted to stop a tiny minority of protesters smashing up a police van that had been conveniently 'left' in the middle of a police 'kettle' show how students are beginning a healthy debate on what tactics their movement should employ.

A police mole tried to infiltrate Militant Labour (forerunner of the Socialist Party) during the anti-racist campaigns of the mid-1990s, but didn't succeed in persuading us to be violent because his attempts to argue for this were always answered politically and didn't get support.

The valuable information he boasted about giving to his bosses in the police, was no more than they could have got from reading our weekly paper (available at a local anti-cuts activity).

Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition

LOCAL GROUPS, trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigns who want to stand candidates in the forthcoming local elections, elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly under the TUSC banner are invited to a conference on 22 January.

The conference is scheduled to follow the NSSN conference against the cuts also being held on 22 January.

● For more information email: electioncoalition@btinternet.com