

BP Disaster Response Workers Report Low Morale, Lack of Pay, Sickness

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BP response workers are reporting that working conditions are poor and morale is low. (Photo: Erika Blumenfeld © 2010)

BP oil disaster response workers are reporting endemic problems, such as not being paid on time, low morale, rampant sickness, equipment failures and being lied to regularly.

“Yesterday was a catastrophe,” one worker, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Truthout. “People are waiting 2-3 hours for their paychecks to be brought to them and I know for a fact three people that didn’t get paid and no reason was given.”

The woman has been working as a clerk for Gulf Asphalt Contractors (GAC), a company that describes itself as “the leading provider of sitework (sic) and building construction services in the Florida Panhandle.” The company, based in Panama City, Florida, is a BP contractor.

While she said she had never been ordered not to talk to the media, she admitted to working amid a climate of fear and believed she would lose her job if her company found out she had done so. “When GAC finds people who have talked to the media, they fire them.”

She spoke with Truthout on what she explained was “my first day off work in 45 days.” She and her co-workers were instructed to take the weekend off due to Tropical Depression Bonnie, but have yet to be called back to work.

“The last thing I heard them say was not to come into work until we call you,” she explained, “What does that mean? We were promised we’d have this work for two years. I

don't even know if we have worker's compensation. They are firing people left and right."

She works at Port Saint Joe, Florida, which is about a three-hour drive east of Pensacola on the coast.

"People are being laid off for no reason," she added, then went on to explain that people working on the beaches cleaning up oil "are getting sick, then they go to the emergency rooms, but they come back and we are always told it was because of food poisoning."

"Everybody I know has bad morale and is confused and doesn't know what is going on," she continued, "Because I work in the TRG trailer, people come to me thinking I know more than they know, but I don't. I'm coming up with shorter hours and having to wait weeks to be paid. They shorted me 12 hours three checks ago, then when they finally paid me for it, they paid me at a lower wage."

Truthout also spoke with a worker in the so-called Vessels of Opportunity program. The program is what BP set up to hire fisherman who are out of work because of the oil disaster, so that they are paid to use their boats in the response effort to do things like laying out oil boom and skimming.

"They're leaving gaps between the booms and the oil is going straight through them," the man, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Truthout in Lafitte, Louisiana, "This is on top of the fact that the booms don't work anyway. The oil is going over and under them."

The man is working on a boat laying out oil boom in the Bay Jimmy region of southeast Louisiana, about an hour's drive south of New Orleans.

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He told Truthout that the small plastic booms that BP is using to stop the oil from reaching the marsh areas "are a waste of time and money. Some company is making lots of money off of this, when in reality they need booms that are five feet tall above the water with at least a six-foot deep skirt under the water. What they have now is a load of crap."



Photo by Erika Blumenfeld © 2010

After pausing to look out at the water, he added, “Somebody is getting filthy ass rich off these red and yellow booms that don’t do shit. Some politicians’ got a buddy manufacturing that crap.”

The worker said that many people are sick and complaining of burning eyes and coughs, among other ailments. He had to attend a Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER) class for the job. HAZWOPER classes are required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) for many of the response workers.

“At HAZWOPER class they told us all this work is harmless, that the oil and dispersants are harmless,” he explained, “But if it’s harmless, why did we even have to take that class? I stood up in class and told them they are full of shit. If it’s so harmless, I’ll run around naked and swim in it.”

He said that as the water warms later in the day, oil on the bottom that has been sunk by dispersants begins to “float back up to the surface, like a lava lamp.” According to the worker, “It smells like strong chemicals, you can tell it’s harmful.”

His voice was hoarse and he had a sore throat that he said was likely because of his working in the oil/dispersants.

The worker explained that he took the job because he needs the money, “since they killed our fishing season, what else was I going to do?”

The GAC employee warned others who are thinking of working as a BP oil disaster response employee. “It’s not worth working for these people,” she said, “You’ll be lied to. They won’t tell you the truth. Don’t work for them. It’s not worth the headache and

stress.”

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