

# The BP Gulf Spill Galvanises Activist Community

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*NEW ORLEANS - With the U.S .government and oil giant British Petroleum under fire for their handling of the more than two-month-old Gulf Coast oil spill disaster, environmental and community activists across the country are taking matters into their own hands.*

In New Orleans, a Gulf Emergency Summit was held to design a grassroots response to the crisis on Jun. 19, resulting in the launch of the “Emergency Committee to Stop the Gulf Oil Catastrophe”.

“We’re organising a broad resistance,” Larry Everest, a spokesperson for the committee from San Francisco, California, who traveled to the Gulf after the disaster, told IPS.

“The goal of the summit flowed from the call we put out, a recognition of the enormity of the catastrophe... and recognising that the disaster is out of control and spreading and BP and the government have shown they are unable and unwilling to stop the disaster and protect the environment or even tell the truth,” Everest said.

Some 35,000 to 60,000 barrels of oil are estimated to be leaking in the Gulf every day. BP says it is collecting 23,000 to 25,000 barrels.

The Gulf Emergency Summit included about 100 activists from around the country, particularly the U.S. south, as well as many from New Orleans where the meeting was held. Organisations represented included public housing advocacy organisations like C3-Hands off Iberville, Survivors Village, World Can’t Wait, the Lower Algiers Environmental Committee, Pax Christi, and Women United for Social Justice.

“We’re calling for people coming together and fighting and organising and demanding the truth and that everything be done to stop this catastrophe. We’re organising mass independent actions that are not subservient to or within the framework of the issue as defined by BP and the government,” Everest said.

“They [BP and the government] have been taking out ads, holding meetings, they’re on TV daily telling the population that everything is being done that should be done, that everyone should follow their lead. This is a lie. They’re not informing people of the full scope of this horror either,” Everest said.

Two actions have been held so far in New Orleans as a result of the Summit. First, two days after the Summit, about 25 activists protested at the United Command in New Orleans. The protesters presented a BP official with their list of demands. The BP official wouldn’t even identify himself to the protesters, Everest said.

Two days after that, Emergency Committee activists attended one of BP's Open Houses for the public, again presented their demands, and demanded that BP answer questions.

In the period shortly after the Apr. 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig, BP representatives would answer questions from citizens at their forums, Everest said. However, BP changed the format after they were "crucified by members of the public" and now company spokespersons give short prepared statements and allow members of the public to visit informational tables.

The Emergency Committee demanded that BP answer questions publicly, not one-on-one, and BP gave in, answering questions at least at that forum for about 40 minutes, Everest said.

"They're trying to prevent collective mass consciousness and actions. It's major PR [public relations] and damage control... These open house meetings are propaganda and disinformation sessions, that 'everything is being done' and 'we're so sorry'. They're cover-ups," Everest said.

In addition, activists have been holding protests across the country in cities not directly impacted by the oil spill.

One day of national protests, referred to as "Crude Awakening", was called on Jun. 19 by Code Pink and the Sierra Club.

In Atlanta, a dozen protesters gathered at a midtown BP gas station. Many of the protesters were young people unaffiliated with any organisation. Others were members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, which also sent many representatives to the Summit.

"We're here to protest BP and the crimes they continue to be perpetrating against all living things in the Gulf Coast region and the U.S.," said Carol Coney, an organiser of the local protest. "It's an assault on our country - environmental and economic terrorism."

People in the U.S. "who have any kind of heart for working people and creatures that live in the ocean, all of us are heartbroken by what has happened and what is still happening", Coney said.

"I think BP has done a great disservice to humanity. This is a f\*\*king disaster and I think BP needs to be held solely responsible for the cleanup effort," said Oliver Howington, a protester and transgender activist.

"This is an excellent example of how corporations and government work together to make environmental disasters like this possible," Howington said. "The government let them have all this deregulation and [won't] impose limits or caps."

Activists held signs that said "Save Our Sea Critters" and "We Demand Alternative Energy Now".

An estimated 100,000 activists around the world also held a "Hands Across the Sand" action on Jun. 26, in which people held hands along beaches in opposition to offshore oil drilling, from 12:00 to 12:15 in their local time zone.

"Originally intended as a local event, Hands Across the Sand went international with events

held in: Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, Germany, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Spain, France, United Kingdom, Greenland, Croatia, Ireland, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Lebanon, Mexico, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Panama, Peru, Poland, Sweden, Tanzania, and South Africa," according to the Surfrider Foundation.

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