

# Leave it in the Ground: No offshore drilling in the Arctic!

On April 22, 2010, British Petroleum's (BP) offshore oil rig exploded, sank and began spewing millions of gallons of oil daily into the Gulf of Mexico.

Eleven workers died in the explosion and millions of people have been affected as oil-poisoned waters drifted towards U.S. shores in what has become the most devastating oil spill in U.S. history. The disastrous BP spill off the Gulf of Mexico has awakened our collective consciousness to the serious risks of offshore drilling. Images of oil soaked wetlands, dying birds and animals and firsthand accounts of jobs and livelihoods lost are just the start of what will be long-lasting impacts of this environmental catastrophe.

## Could this be Canada's future?

With the discovery of 90 billion barrels of oil and 1,670 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under melting ice, Canada's Arctic region is increasingly being viewed as a final frontier for fossil fuel development. More than 80 per cent of the oil and gas is found offshore. BP has obtained three offshore exploration licenses for the Beaufort Sea. Imperial Oil, ExxonMobil Canada and ConocoPhillips have also been successful in acquiring exploration rights for a part of the Beaufort Sea. Drilling is expected to start by 2014.

In March 2010, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada issued a call for bids in the Beaufort Sea and Mackenzie Delta. Shortly after that, the Geological Survey of Canada was approved for seismic tests exploring for oil and gas in Lancaster South in the Eastern Canadian Arctic despite opposition by local Inuit, the Nunavut territorial government and Parks Canada who had proposed the location become a national marine conservation area. Since then, a Nunavut court has put an end to these tests for the time being, finding that the study poses too many dangers to northern marine animals and to the people that depend on them.

All of these actions show the Canadian government wants control and is ready to allow big oil corporations access in the fragile Arctic ecosystem no matter what the price to indigenous peoples, water and the environment.

## The current state of the Arctic

We are faced with a climate crisis. Leading climate scientists are reporting that the highest safe level of carbon dioxide in our atmo-



*The Council of Canadians took the message of "the Arctic is not for sale" to G20 leaders as they met in Toronto in June 2010.*

sphere is 300 or 350 parts per million (PPM). The concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> is now at 390ppm. The most important point to emphasize is that we need to urgently reduce emissions.

It is no small irony that as sea ice melts because of climate change, fossil fuel drilling will become increasingly attractive. Summer ice-free waters and transportation routes through the Northwest Passage are just some of the climate change induced realities that would make this possible.

The Arctic is already facing some of the most severe climate impacts, warming at a rate twice as fast as the rest of the world. Just recently, an 87 square-kilometre chunk of ice broke off the Petermann Glacier in northern Greenland. Some scientists are predicting that the Arctic Ocean will be completely ice-free in the summer by 2030.

The potential impacts of further Arctic oil and gas developments (and other developments associated with an ice-free north passage) on the fragile ice edge ecosystem would be substantial. Circumpolar indigenous peoples rely on this ecosystem for food security and cultural needs.

## **The dangers of offshore drilling – and who is watching?**

The difficulty to respond to, and clean up an oil spill in the remote and fragile Arctic environment makes offshore drilling even riskier. As Michael Byers, author of *Who Owns the Arctic* describes, the Arctic's marine ecosystem is especially vulnerable due to its short food chains and species already threatened by warming temperatures and disappearing sea ice.

In the wake of the BP disaster, the potential of offshore drilling in the Canadian Arctic has come under increasing criticism. The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, on behalf of Inuit peoples, wrote to Prime Minister Stephen Harper calling for a "time-out" on drilling in the Beaufort Sea in order to take stock of environmental concerns and to look at ways to minimize risks and impacts.

The truth is offshore drilling is inherently risky.

As reported in a recent investigation by the *Wall Street Journal*, offshore drilling regulations have increasingly shifted safety responsibility to the oil industry. Similar to the U.S., Canadian offshore drilling regulations have recently been relaxed. In December 2009, regulations shifted more responsibility to the energy industry to self-regulate, including rules meant to safeguard against oil spills.

Before the BP disaster, BP and other oil companies reportedly urged Canadian regulators to drop a safeguard requirement that companies in the Arctic have to drill relief wells in the same season as the primary well. Until recently, the National Energy Board (NEB) was prepared to give Arctic drillers, including BP, an exemption for relief wells.

Bill C-9, the Budget Implementation Act (which was passed in the House of Commons, June 8, 2010) contains several provisions that will gut environmental assessment rules, including giving the Environment Minister the power to decide whether or not an environmental assessment is necessary for oil and gas developments and the capacity to shift responsibility for environmental assessments solely to the Big Oil-friendly National Energy Board (NEB).

In response to the public outcry in the aftermath of the BP disaster, the NEB is conducting a Review of Arctic Offshore drilling (announced in May 2010). Unfortunately, the scope of the review is such that it will not consider the question of whether offshore drilling in the Arctic could ever be safe, as well as the compelling reasons for a moratorium. It will focus instead on drilling safety while protecting the environment, responding effectively when things go wrong, and "lessons learned" where other relevant accidents have occurred. The Harper government has pointed to the NEB review

as its response to a motion put forward by NDP Environment Critic Linda Duncan that calls for a "thorough review" of all federal laws, regulations and policies pertaining to the development of "unconventional sources of oil and gas," which includes both offshore drilling and production in the oil sands. The motion, which still needs to be acted on, was passed by the House of Commons. While the NEB review has many merits, it is not a sufficient response to the critical and more vast concerns raised in the NDP motion.

## **Can there be a different future?**

It is imperative that steps are taken to transition away from fossil-fuel based economies. We need significant investments and planning to reduce people's reliance on fossil fuels. This includes vastly increased conservation, energy efficiency, renewable energy expansion, public transit and sustainable agriculture. We need a commitment to do things differently in order to stop and reverse climate change impacts and create a more sustainable future for everyone.

A moratorium on all new exploration for fossil fuel resources in the Arctic is a logical first step in the transition off of fossil fuel reliance. In particular, we need to stop offshore drilling in the Beaufort Sea before it starts. We cannot risk the fragile Arctic ecosystem to continue to feed profit-hungry oil companies, especially when doing so will contribute to the already serious climate crisis, and is at odds with the needed transition away from fossil-fuel based economies.

## **Take Action!**

Contact Prime Minister Stephen Harper today and demand a moratorium on oil and gas exploration and drilling in the Arctic – and say "no" to drilling in the Beaufort Sea!

## **Join the Council of Canadians**

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