

June 18, 2010 Partial Transcript MSNBC Countdown With Keith Olbermann

Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill Workers & Media Coverage-Related to British Petroleum

“...O’DONNELL: This BP executive put out a memo telling employees they are allowed to talk to the media. So, why didn’t the word filter down to the security guards working on a public beach?...”

“...O’DONNELL: COUNTDOWN has catalogued this week the many instances of BP preventing journalists from gaining access to the Gulf oil spill and of BP intimidating its own cleanup workers to keep them from wearing protective gear.

In our fourth story tonight: WDSU News anchor Scott Walker who was prevented from speaking to cleanup workers will join me in a moment.

You will recall that BP is trying to stop its own cleanup workers—many of them fishermen—from wearing protective gear as the executive director of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Marylee Orr, told us this week.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MARYLEE ORR, LOUISIANA ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION NETWORK: When our folks, our fishermen folks had their respirators on, they were told to take them off, that they would be fired if they used them. I think that perhaps they’re afraid they’ll admit some sort of liability that there’s a problem in the air if they allow them to use the respirators.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

O’DONNELL: Another guest on this program confirmed this. Monique Harden, the co-director of Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, whose group was providing protective gear to workers at no charge.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MONIQUE HARDEN, ADVOCATES FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS: What we have been told by the folks who are involved in the cleanup work is that when they have come to the job site wearing the respirators and protective gear that they’ve been provided, they were told by BP representatives that they would—that they would be terminated from employment if they wore them and had to, you know, get rid of them.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

O’DONNELL: And our next guest sparred with BP’s on-site supervisor on Grand Isle, Louisiana, over access to parts of the beach cleanup workers.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Every security guard here has been given instructions to every single news crew you can be outside of a hundred yards of the workers along the boom.
SCOTT WALKER, WDSU NEWS: Who is saying that? Because nobody can tell me unless you're the Jefferson Parish sheriff's office, you're the Coast Guard, or you're the military, can you tell me where to go on this public beach.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I can tell you where to go because I am employed to keep this beach—I am employed to keep this beach safe.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

O'DONNELL: Joining me now, WDSU News anchor Scott Walker. Thanks for your time tonight, Scott Walker.

WALKER: No problem. Glad to be here.

O'DONNELL: OK. Now, can you describe the rest of that exchange that you had there?

WALKER: Well, from there they continued to block us from walking toward the tent where the workers were under during their break. Eventually, they called the Jefferson Parish sheriff's office on us. We didn't call the sheriff's office. They called them to intervene.

The sheriff's office basically said it's a public beach. They can go where they want to go. So, we eventually got over to that tent which was my goal in the beginning was just to get to the tent with the cleanup workers. I didn't really expect them to talk but wanted the opportunity to be able to ask them if they had anything to say.

O'DONNELL: And so, when you got to them, were you able to ask some questions of those workers?

WALKER: I was able to ask. Once I got there and had some—had clearance—but I did have to tell the supervisor there that the guy down the beach told me I could and he, after I told him that, told the workers:

"Don't answer his questions. Don't answer his questions." Point blank. And I said, "Well, this guy down the beach told me I could ask the questions. Now, you're telling them not to answer the questions."

So after—after that, I did ask the questions with, you know, ignoring his objections. And the workers there ultimately all said, no. We don't want to be on camera. But that was, as I'm asking the questions, another guy was saying, you don't have to say anything if you don't want to. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to.

So, I think they were definitely intimidated and fearful that they may lose their jobs if they were to talk to the media. And I've talked to several off-camera who say, yes, we, you know, not only were we forced to sign this early that we don't talk to the media, but now that it's not in the contract, from I understand, they still aren't willing to really talk to the media much because of that underlying fear that they could lose their jobs. And a lot of these people need the work.

O'DONNELL: And what was your sense of what you walked into there? Did this feel like an isolated incident where a couple guys might be overstepping their authority bounds in trying to control what you were doing? Or did you get the feeling that this is the program—this is what they've been told to do by BP wherever they are?

WALKER: It's clearly what they were told to do, because I've had several run-ins other than the one that was documented on camera. One the day before where we ran into security guards that told us the same thing. And every time we pressed them, they repeated time and time again, we're here in support of the cleanup effort. Different people said the same thing. We're here in support of the cleanup effort.

So, they were well-versed in what to say to the media as well and to not give away much.

O'DONNELL: And is this what you expected when you went out there? Had word been filtering through the local media that this is what's going on out in these beaches?

WALKER: Absolutely. We expected to be hassled because we heard of different print and broadcast organizations that had problems on the beach with security. And we knew what our rights were and we knew we could go down there and we could walk up to the boom that separated the contaminated area from the uncontaminated area.

We did not have to stay outside of 100 yards from the workers and we could talk to the workers, according to what the BP CEO said two days prior to that run-in.

So, we knew what we could do, yet the word hadn't filtered down to the people charged with securing the beach. So, there's a big disconnect from the top of the organization to the people charged with enforcing the regulations they want to put in place.

O'DONNELL: And what are the people charged with enforcing the regulations going to do now? I mean, they've learned now that they cannot prevent you from access to the public beaches. Where do you think this coverage goes from here?

WALKER: Well, to BP's credit, after our story aired on Friday and it sort of blew up on the Internet over the weekend, when we went back this Tuesday, this past Tuesday for a follow-up, we had no obstructions on the beach. Complete access. Anywhere we wanted to go. We talked to who we wanted to talk to, went to the tents.

Still, none of the workers would talk, but we weren't hassle at all by anybody.

O'DONNELL: Scott Walker—

WALKER: So I think from here—

O'DONNELL: Go ahead.

WALKER: -- we'll have to stay with it.

(CROSSTALK)

WALKER: We have to stay with this story.

O'DONNELL: OK. We're getting a little satellite delay here. Don't worry about it. Scott Walker of our NBC affiliate WDSU in Atlanta—many thanks for your time tonight.

WALKER: In New Orleans. Thank you.

O'DONNELL: Oh, in New Orleans. OK. Well, we'll get that one straight next time..."

END OF THIS SEGMENT