

30 years of testing in Polynesian colony

# Victims of French A-bomb tests demand compensation

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For 30 years, beginning in 1966, France detonated 46 atomic bombs in atmospheric tests and exploded 147 underground at its atomic-testing site in the South Pacific atoll of Moruroa. The testing program ended in 1996, following massive worldwide protests, and today French A-bomb tests are simulated on computers. International protest groups no longer mobilize over Moruroa. However, former workers at the site, left by France to deal with the radiation-related health problems, are only just beginning to organize in protest.

The French government, perhaps deliberately, conducted no systematic medical examinations of workers at the site, either when it was first set up or when it was dismantled. Fifty percent of former test workers were unfamiliar with or had never worn a radiation measuring device. The damage to the victims from exposure to radiation can no longer be established, as the military failed to release the necessary medical data. Officially, there was no risk of radiation, and therefore French authorities reject requests for compensation. Many radiation victims have no health insurance or are inadequately covered and unable to obtain medical treatment.

Following Algerian independence, France lost its atomic test site in southern Algeria. The remote and barely inhabited coral atoll within France's colony in Polynesia appeared to the military to be an ideal substitute—so ideal that every precaution was thrown to the winds. In contrast to the practice in Algeria, atmospheric tests were immediately conducted. It is also possible that atmospheric tests were conducted in order to compete with the US—the latter was conducting atmospheric tests in the Bikini atoll at the time—and to boost France's pretensions as a world power.

From 1962 to the present, up to 15,000 Polynesians worked on the French atomic-testing program, blandly named "The Centre for Pacific Experiments", or CEP. Most worked in menial jobs such as construction or in the kitchens, but some had to carry out highly dangerous decontamination work, dig detonation chambers on oil rigs or carry out tests following explosions.

Former test workers were stationed on the atomic-test islands of Moruroa and Fangataufa, the garrison island of Hao, or in laboratories on the main island of Tahiti. Many came into contact with radiation during the course of their work, but were unsure of the danger. They were mainly local villagers, who did not understand French. Concepts such as "radiation" and "contamination" were outside of their experience.

In the documentary *Moruroa and Us*, the Dutch social scientists Pieter de Vries and Hans Seur interviewed 737 former workers at the French nuclear weapons test site. Seventy-three percent of those questioned did not know when they were hired that they would be working in an atomic-testing program. Ten percent of new employees were 17 years or younger, with 0.3 percent aged 10 years or under. Forty-one percent of those

questioned said they had to work in a contaminated zone. Of these, 14 percent said that the handling of contaminated material was part of their job. At times no protective clothing was available, while on other occasions protective clothing was removed because it hindered work in the hot climate.

The practice of frequently altering the boundaries of contaminated zones contributed over the course of time to the prohibited area not being taken seriously. In line with their cultural traditions, Tahitians often did not observe the restrictive rules. For example, fishing in the Moruroa lagoons was prohibited, but 55 percent of those interviewed stated they ate fish caught there. Fishing and the consumption of fish are an important part of Polynesian culture, and no fresh fish was available from the canteens.

Many of those who had consumed fish were treated for poisoning in the hospital, and the consumption of fish was therefore no secret. While the CEP had formulated safety measures, in practice these were not supervised. Many former test workers today blame the CEP for not adequately informing them of the dangers involved and for establishing an atmosphere in which their questions and concerns had no place. Ironically, the word Moruroa translates as "Big Secret" in the Tahitian language. Many work contracts contained a secrets clause that carried the threat of dismissal combined with a carefully selected system of bonuses for dangerous work. The combined effect was to thwart any discussion of the dangers among employees.

The survey established that 7.4 percent of former Moruroa workers had physically disabled children, with 2.4 percent having mentally disabled children.

Raymond Pia, who must formerly have been a strong man, is now in early retirement. He appears older than his 59 years and his eyes twitch nervously. He worked for 28 years, from 1968 to 1996, at "Ground Zero," the detonation area on Moruroa. During this time, he was relatively close to nearly all the explosions. His job was to work with a team drilling shafts more than 500 meters deep in which to sink the bombs and then, after detonation, to bury the remains of the detonation cylinders underground. "The employers said it could be dangerous but we had no protective clothing." So Pia, along with his coworkers, handled the highly charged radioactive components dressed only in T-shirts and shorts.

In December 2002, he had a big toe removed in the private Paofai Clinic in Tahiti ("supposedly only diabetes"). In May this year his testicles were removed. "Nothing serious, only a minor cancer," according to his doctors. He is at present in France for further treatment, and declared. "Without exception, all my co-workers have cancer. I am very afraid." Dr Michael Brygiere, from the organisation "Medecins du Monde," recently examined Raymond Pia and diagnosed radiation sickness.

Roland Oldham, 52, is president of the association, "Moruroa e tatou" (Moruroa and Us). The organization has 3,359 members, former test

workers, 70 percent of whom have health problems related to radioactivity from Moruroa. The association was founded only two years ago, long after the tests had ended. Up until then, not only had the secrets clause in the employment contract prevented public discussion about the danger of atomic testing, but it was also politically taboo. One would have been branded an enemy of France. The silence was broken only with the establishment of the association, when the victims were no longer isolated individuals.

“France should admit that the atomic tests carried with them dangers to health and it should take full responsibility,” said Oldham. “We demand free medical treatment, compensation for health damages, infertility and the inability to work. It should also grant pensions to the surviving veterans. In addition, the government should enact legislation similar to that in the US, where 21 types of cancer, associated with atomic explosions, are automatically recognized as work-related illnesses. The workers are all dying off!”

Oldham cited the case of a female colleague at the military laboratory in Mahina, Tahiti. She was forced to handle apparently radioactive coral from Moruroa and prepare it for analysis. She is now in the terminal stages of leukemia and a few days ago asked to be discharged from the hospital to die at home. Last year 84 of the 1,544 original members of the association died.

The CEP authorities and the French government maintain that, because Moruroa was an official weapons testing site in which all risks were scientifically controlled, there was no radiation fallout and therefore no radiation victims.

Gilles Soubiran, 53, an intern at the only public hospital—Territorial Central Hospital—in Tahiti’s capital, Papeete, pointed to the obstructionist methods of the military. “Until 1998, Moruroa workers were treated in military hospitals, and we received no records of their medical histories,” he said. Nor was the hospital provided with information about the damage to patients from radiation.

Dr. Soubiran emphasized that thyroid cancer, related to the release of radioactive iodine after atomic explosions, is more common in Polynesia than in the rest of the world’s population. “One can certainly state on the basis of scientific evidence that at least in the case of the above ground atomic tests that the risks of cancer throughout Polynesia have increased,” he said.

In the *Moruroa and Us* study, it was established that in Polynesia, 25.7 out of 100,000 women contracted thyroid cancer, compared to a ratio of 4.8 out of 100,000 women in France. Dr. Soubiran is not surprised that victims are only now coming forward. “Leukemia typically manifests itself 15 to 20 years after contact with radiation.” The victims are therefore at the mercy of the government. “I know of one case dealing with a civilian inspector who contracted cancer and was acknowledged as a cancer victim. His driver, with a lesser social status, received over many years perhaps the same dose of radiation and likewise contracted cancer. He was, however, refused recognition as a cancer victim.”

The authorities are not taking Dr. Soubiran’s opinion as a medical expert seriously. He gave evidence on behalf of Alfred Pautehea, a Moruroa worker who is campaigning for recognition as a victim of radiation poisoning. He said that the Pautehea “was suffering with the type of leukemia that workers who have been in contact with radioactive iodine contract.” A Dr. F. Yune from the medical council of the state-run health and social service insurance “CPS” in Tahiti argued the contrary, declaring that, as Alfred Pautehea was not exposed to radioactivity in the course of his work, leukemia could not be a work-related illness.

After chemotherapy and two admissions to hospital in France, Alfred Pautehea’s condition has at present stabilized, but he is by no means cured.

Doubts and a change in attitude towards the official French view of the completely safe and harmless nature of atomic testing first surfaced

among former Moruroa workers and the public at large following the Chernobyl disaster and its associated fallout over wide areas of Europe. At the same time, serious atomic accidents also occurred in Moruroa during the period of underground testing. In March 1982, cyclone William removed a layer of asphalt from buried plutonium, spreading over 10 kilograms of highly radioactive substance over the atoll and also over the residences of approximately 2,000 workers stationed there. It took the military over five years to decontaminate the area.

The French authorities even regarded atmospheric tests as harmless. Notwithstanding their view, the then-French defence minister, Yves Bouges, referring to accidents at Moruroa and speaking during the transition to underground testing, affirmed that Moruroa would become a safer workplace—implicitly acknowledging that previously the facility had been unsafe.

“The only safe place in Tahiti is in the church!”, declared John Doom, a former evangelist church official and now co-coordinator of “Moruroa e Tatou.” Doom has been a bitter opponent of atomic testing since tests began in July 1966.

At that time he worked as an interpreter for a French government minister who had observed the first atmospheric nuclear explosion from a nearby island in the Gambier group. The wind turned and drove the fallout towards the island. The pair just managed to escape by plane while the inhabitants remained behind unprotected. “On average, 17 percent of the population develops cancer. Of our former Moruroa workforce, 34 percent have cancer!”

When French President Jacques Chirac visited Tahiti at the end of April, Doom led the first-ever demonstration of the association of victims in order to hand Chirac a resolution signed by 19 of Tahiti’s parliament members and 38 members of the French parliament. After marching 300 meters, the peaceful procession was blocked by a massive police contingent and Doom was forced to send the resolution by post. “Nevertheless, I’m very pleased,” he said. Only a few years ago, the victims would not have dared to be seen on the street for fear of reprisals, but today 300 association members were no longer afraid to go public.

“Moruroa e Tatou’s long-term strategy is to lobby parliament and exert public pressure so that its members achieve the status of victims. The French Senate, at the initiative of the organization, held a conference in Moruroa in February 2002. Its sister organization, the French “Association of veterans of nuclear tests” (AVEN), forced the courts to recognize three of its members as atomic radiation victims.

However, one group has no particular advocates: the Foreign Legion frequently had to perform particularly dangerous jobs. “I know one legionnaire who went to Moruroa in 1995 as an 18-year-old in order to assist in the decontamination of the facilities following the final tests. To date, he has undergone five operations—on the thyroid gland, lungs, heart and head. He is still a member of the Foreign Legion and therefore cannot go public; otherwise he would be considered a traitor. He was told a soldier’s duty is to die,” said Roland Oldham.

It is not only the 15,000 Polynesian workers who have suffered the ill effects of the atomic tests in the South Pacific. The long-term damage caused by radiation and the associated contamination of a whole region is not yet clear. The French government has failed to carry out a public inquiry or make its own findings public, while it has repeatedly blocked any thoroughgoing investigation by independent scientists.

Prior to the commencement of atomic testing, Tahiti was a sleepy paradise whose people on the whole lived in harmony with nature and in accord with the laws of its thousand-year-old culture. Within 40 years, Tahiti was catapulted into the modern era through changes brought on by the atomic tests. Cultural identity was lost; young people do not even speak the language of their fathers and grandfathers and no longer understand the old culture. But neither do they have any prospects in the modern era. With the end of the tests, the largest employer has left, and

France will end its massive financial support in 2006. Future social conflicts can already be foreseen in the slums of Tahiti's capital, Papeete, and its neighboring city of Faaa.

This text was generously supplied to the *World Socialist Web Site* by Wolfgang B. Kleiner ([www.wolfgangkleiner.de](http://www.wolfgangkleiner.de)), who conducted interviews and also took the photos.

Sources for the text include the document "Moruroa and Us" (ISBN 2-9508291-5-5), and reports in the newspapers *Dépêche de Tahiti*, *Nouvelles de Tahiti*, and the monthly magazine *Toere*.

Moruroa is the geographically correct form of spelling. The Tahitian abbreviation for the islands is Muru, which explains the repeated wrong spelling used in the west of Mururoa.



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