

Japanese emperor calls on the nation to “share the burden”

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In an unprecedented speech delivered by Japanese Emperor Akihito on Wednesday, the 77-year-old urged the Japanese people to “work together” and help each other overcome the massive radiation crisis triggered at the Fukushima nuclear power plant by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

The emperor declared in the televised address: “I hope that those affected by the earthquake will not give up hope and will strive to survive, while taking care of their health.” He said he was “greatly moved” by the bravery of the survivors who were “trying to live on through this enormous disaster.” The emperor called on the nation as whole “to share the burden of the difficult period.”

The purpose of the message was to make crystal clear that working people would have to fend for themselves. They should not rely on the authorities, let alone protest against the government’s ongoing cover up of the extent of the nuclear crisis and the incapacity of the official establishment to resolve it. This line was summed up by *Asahi Shimbun*’s senior staff writer Keiji Takeuchi, who declared that “society as a whole must accept this consequence” for the building of a nuclear power industry as “a key pillar of its energy policy”.

Japan’s emperor, the symbolic head of state, has been largely hidden from the public eye. The last major public speech by an emperor was delivered by Akihito’s father, Hirohito, in August 1945, when he announced Japan’s surrender in World War II, days after the US atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The emperor’s latest intervention has underscored the severity of the crisis facing not only the ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) government, but also the entire political establishment. Much of the population has palpably lost confidence in the authority of the state. The lack of an effective nationwide rescue plan, the anarchic rotating blackouts, the concern over radiation poisoning, the inconsistent official story on the Fukushima nuclear plant and the inadequate supplies of basic necessities to tsunami-hit prefectures have caused panic, fear and anger among working people throughout the country.

Yuhei Sato, governor of Fukushima prefecture, told the *Financial Times* on Wednesday that residents in the district were “uneasy and angry”. Taisho University psychology professor

Susumu Hirakawa told the *New York Times*: “The mistrust of the government and TEPCO [Tokyo Electric Power Company, private owner of the Fukushima nuclear power plant] was already there before the crisis, and people are even angrier now because of the inaccurate information they’re getting.”

Within Japan, however, the media is trying to promote “order” and “discipline” as the virtues of Japanese society, for fear that the growing public discontent will erupt into open protest. An *Asahi Shimbun* editorial on Wednesday praised Tokyo’s train commuters for “patiently waiting in lines” without complaining. “Commuters in the capital have exercised self-control as they perceive their problems are nothing compared with the tremendous hardships the quake survivors are enduring.”

The opposition parties have been working to prevent the working class from questioning the corporate interests and lack of planning that lies at the heart of Japan’s nuclear power industry. The main concern of the opposition Liberal Democratic Party, which presided over the construction of over 50 nuclear power plants in the country, is that it will be “extremely difficult” for authorities to find locations for new nuclear power plants in the future. The official “left”, such as the Stalinist Japanese Communist Party, has delivered polite criticisms of the DPJ government’s slow response to the nuclear emergency and “suggested” that it create a team of experts to deal with the escalating crisis, independent of the corporate energy ministry.

Notwithstanding the calls for order and calm from the emperor and the DPJ government, the response of the ruling elite as a whole has been the precise opposite. The Tokyo stock exchange has fallen dramatically in the past few days as investors sell off, causing global panic over the immediate prospects for the Japanese economy. On Wednesday, when Akihito delivered his speech, the Tokyo stock exchange fell more than 10 percent. On Thursday, the Nikkei opened 4 percent lower, as investors reacted to the EU energy commission’s estimation that radioactivity at the Fukushima nuclear plant was “out of control”.

It is worth recalling the consequences of the Great Kanto Earthquake, which struck in 1923, killing more than 100,000 in Tokyo and other Japanese cities. The catastrophe accelerated the demise of Japan’s wartime boom, which had resulted from the country’s loans and exports to the European powers that had been

involved in World War I. The huge economic losses quickly transformed the Japanese government from creditor to debtor status, while social inequality reached boiling point. Far from channelling finance into reconstruction after the Great Kanto quake, Tokyo imposed austerity measures aimed at curtailing the level of debt.

Incapable of dealing with the disaster, the Japanese regime attempted to sheet home the blame to foreign workers (especially Korean and Chinese migrants) for sabotaging the rescue, a campaign that rapidly expanded into the ruthless political suppression of militant and socialist-minded workers. Increasingly authoritarian rule displaced Japan's emerging parliamentary political system in the early decades of the 20th century. Heavily hit by the Great Depression in 1929, Japanese capitalism was ultimately driven into militarism and war, ended only by the catastrophic atomic bombings in 1945.

Today, the Japanese state is approaching a similar abyss. The 2008-09 financial breakdown drastically worsened the country's public debt crisis, which has now reached more than 200 percent of GDP. Japan's economic prospects were already grim, following a decade of stagnation in the 1990s, well before the current chaos. Its standing as the world's second largest economy was overtaken by China last year, while millions of young Japanese have lost the life-long employment security their parents enjoyed during post-war period.

At the same time, Japan's "democracy" was in a state of paralysis prior to the earthquake and nuclear disaster, with the DPJ government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan on the verge of collapse. Just days before the earthquake, the *Yomiuri Shimbun's* survey showed that the Kan government's approval rating had dropped from 70 percent, when he came to office last June, to a low of just 24 percent. As many as 51 percent of respondents wanted Kan to "step down as soon as possible".

The DPJ government was elected in 2009 under the banner of "change", directed against the LDP, which had ruled Japan for almost 50 years. But the DPJ has proven it is not fundamentally different to the LDP, especially under conditions where one of Kan's key policies has been to double the already unpopular consumption tax to 10 percent, forcing the working class to pay for the government's huge debt. After Kan lost his majority in the upper house in last July's election, the LDP has threatened to block his 2011 budget in the parliament, on the basis that its austerity measures are insufficient.

On the other hand, the DPJ has been hit by a series of political funding scandals, forcing former foreign minister Seiji Maehara—a likely successor to Kan—to resign earlier this month. Kan's power base in the party has been further undermined by the suspension of membership of former power broker Ichiro Ozawa in January, a move that has alienated significant numbers of his backers among DPJ lawmakers. Any rebellion of these layers against Kan would profoundly destabilise the government, if not lead to its collapse.

Ozawa represents a wing of Japanese big business heavily dependent on China as a major export market and source of cheap labour. Ozawa launched a leadership challenge against Kan last year, and was only narrowly defeated. The conflict was rooted in the growing rivalry between the US and China, with the Obama administration launching an increasingly aggressive campaign, involving Japan as the chief bulwark against China's rising influence. Kan represented a section of the ruling elite that saw the US-Japan military alliance as essential to Japan's continuing influence in Asia.

While formally adhering to a "no-nuclear" principle in relation to possessing or building nuclear weapons, an unstated premise of the Japanese ruling elite's nuclear power program is the creation of the conditions to build nuclear weapons.

Just three days before the earthquake that damaged the Fukushima nuclear plant, Tokyo's conservative mayor Shintaro Ishihara gave an interview with the British *Independent* newspaper, boasting that Japan could build nuclear weapons within a year and that Tokyo had to send a "strong message to the world" that it had such capability. Ishihara declared: "People talk about the cost and other things, but the fact is that diplomatic bargaining power means nuclear weapons." With a nuclear armed Japan, he claimed, "China would not have dared lay a hand on the Senkakus Islands" in the East China Sea.

Responding to Ishihara's comment, Ma Guowei, a Chinese nuclear missile general attending the National People's Congress, told the *People's Daily* that China would launch a pre-emptive strike under such circumstances. "Once China believes Japan has crossed the threshold [of building nuclear weapons], China will attack without declaring war, much like the US invaded Iraq. It would require nobody's approval." Implicitly threatening nuclear war, Ma declared the attack would turn Japan into "scorched earth" and that the Japanese nation would "disappear from the planet".

The comments by Ishihara and Ma serve to underscore the complete irrationality of the capitalist system, based on the enrichment of private individuals and corporations, and on the system of rival nation-states. Not only is the profit system incapable of combating major natural disasters and rationally deploying nuclear energy to fulfil social need, but the ruling elites of the major powers are actively seeking to utilise nuclear technology for destructive military purposes, threatening the very survival of mankind.



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