Obama fronts for US nuclear power industry

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In response to the ongoing nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan, several governments have either announced limitations to their nuclear energy programs or have made gestures toward greater regulation. Germany will scale back the number of plants in operation, Italy has put in place a one-year moratorium delaying plans to restart nuclear production, and Russia, France, and Spain have called for new international regulations on the industry and "stress tests" for existing plants. In most cases these measures are symbolic, aiming to ease popular concern over the possibility of similar catastrophes and shore up the credibility of the nuclear power industry.

Yet the Obama administration, virtually alone among governments of the nuclear-energy producing states, has gone out of its way to insist that no changes will be made outside of vague calls to "learn from" the crisis in Japan.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has insisted there is no need for new regulation or oversight, and there will be no moratorium on either the continuation of old plants or the construction of new ones. It has even granted a 20-year extension to a problem-riddled nuclear Vermont Yankee plant, whose reactor is a replica to that of the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The White House position is indistinguishable from that of the US nuclear energy industry itself. As was the case in the BP Gulf oil disaster, its overriding concern with the unfolding catastrophe in Japan is the defense of the multi-billion-dollar energy firms that control the US nuclear industry—including Exelon, to which Obama's two closest political associates, former Chief-of-Staff Rahm Emanuel and top adviser David Axelrod, are intimately linked.

The obstinate defense of the nuclear industry comes in spite of several recent reports of dangerous problems with US plants. These include:

*A report from the inspector general of the NRC released this week revealing that more than one quarter of US nuclear power plants have failed to reveal legally-required information to the NRC about broken and defective equipment that could threaten reactor safety.

*A recent report by the Union of Concerned Scientists that found 14 "near misses" at US nuclear power plants in 2010 alone. "Problems at the plants included leaking roofs, floods near safety equipment, rusty pipes, faulty pumps, fires and inadvertent shutdowns. Plant owners in some cases knowingly disregarded protocol while NRC inspectors turned a blind eye to the violations. Energy companies filed false reports and delayed repairs, cutting corners to increase their bottom line," the *World Socialist Web Site* reported. (See: Report details 14 "near-misses" at US nuclear power plants in 2010)

*A report from ABC News published Tuesday that found 56 serious violations of safety at nuclear power plants, including "missing or mishandled nuclear material, inadequate emergency plans, faulty backup generators, and corroded cooling pipes." These violations were not corrected by the NRC. At the Indian Point nuclear plant just outside New York City, which lies near the junction of two fault lines, the NRC took no steps to force plant owner Entergy to fix an earthquake safety device that has been leaking for 18 years. At a nuclear power plant in Birmingham, Alabama, owned by the Southern Nuclear Operating Company, the backup diesel generator—which in Fukushima was destroyed by the tsunami—was declared inoperable, 18 years after the NRC first became aware of cracks in the unit.

*An Associated Press report, also published Tuesday, revealed that the NRC is aware that most nuclear plants in the US have emergency electrical supply systems inadequate to deal with even short power outages if backup generators fail. The Peach Bottom Atomic

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Power Station outside Lancaster, Pennsylvania would begin to emit radiation within one day of such an event, the NRC concluded. The plant's battery systems have enough power to operate for only eight hours, the same time span as the Fukushima Daiichi plant. "After that, it is assumed that power would be restored," the report notes.

*Federal attorneys this week brought charges against an electrical subcontractor working on the development of a new plant in Tennessee for falsely claiming to have done work on the plant's electrical system, which in fact was not done.

*Media reports reveal that 23 American nuclear power plants use precisely the same reactor, the General Electric Mark 1, used in the Fukushima plant, and that American regulators knew as early as 1972 that these reactors' containment vessels were inadequate in the event of a meltdown. One of these, Entergy's Vermont Yankee plant, was only last week given a 20-year extension on its license to operate by the NRC.

These and other revelations paint a clear portrait of a nuclear energy industry that is dangerously mismanaged and virtually unregulated by government agencies, which consistently bow to its profit interests.

The NRC has responded with indifference. The extension of the Vermont Yankee license was announced in a form letter and without further comment. In response to the inspector general's report that more than 25 percent of plants were not reporting safety problems, the NRC said it was an "administrative" problem.

Obama is slated to give what is billed as a major speech on energy on Wednesday at Georgetown University. In it, he is expected to reiterate his administration's support for both deep-water oil drilling and nuclear energy.

Tom Saporito, a nuclear technician who was blacklisted by the industry for raising safety concerns, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the Obama administration's approach to nuclear energy is "dangerous."

"The administration, including the president of the United States, is recklessly endangering the population by promoting the construction of nuclear plants and by not taking affirmative action to deal with known safety problems," he said.

Paul Gunther of Beyond Nuclear pointed to the links between Obama and industry-leader Exelon. "The Obama administration has been more concerned with damage control than the issue of public health raised by the disaster," he said. "Let's face it. Obama brought Exelon into the White House through Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod."

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