

The implications of the Japanese catastrophe

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14 March 2011

As survivors numbly gather up the wreckage of their lives and search for relatives, the full extent of the disaster that has befallen Japan is only gradually becoming apparent. The *World Socialist Web Site* expresses its deepest sympathy to the families of those who have died, to those who have been injured, and to those who have lost their homes and whose livelihoods have been swept away in this cataclysm.

At least 10,000 people have been killed. That figure is likely to rise in the coming days as rescue teams search the towns devastated by the 30-foot waves of the tsunami that engulfed Japan's northeastern coast. Satellite images show that whole towns have been wiped off the map by the force of the water. Video footage shows shipping containers and boats being carried far inland, where the waves picked up cars, trucks and trains, lifted houses off their foundations and smashed them into piles of wreckage. As gas pipes ruptured, buildings caught on fire and were carried still burning on the flood.

In Minamisanriku, a small coastal town that lies in a steep sided valley, four-storey buildings were toppled by a wave. As many as 10,000 of the 17,000 population of the town have perished. The residents had a 30-minute warning of the wave's approach, but the one road out of the town rapidly became jammed with traffic and many did not escape in time. Those who survived are huddled in the local school, one of the few buildings on high ground. Even the hospital has been destroyed. The injured are being airlifted to nearby towns by helicopter.

In Sendai, one of the hardest hit cities, there are no accurate figures for the death toll. Rescue teams are still combing the wreckage. But hundreds of bodies have already been washed up on the beaches. Survivors are queuing for food and water. The power supply is cut off and there is no heat in the still bitter late-winter weather. Motorists are waiting in line for fuel, which is being rationed, desperate to have full tanks in case aftershocks cause another tsunami.

Compounding the effects of the earthquake and tidal wave are the dangers of a series of nuclear reactor meltdowns on the scale of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, or even worse. Immediately after the earthquake a state of emergency was declared around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant

in Miyagi prefecture. Some 200,000 people have been evacuated from the surrounding area.

On Saturday afternoon there was a huge explosion that appears to have destroyed the concrete building surrounding the Unit 1 reactor. The reactor's steel containment chamber is said to be intact, but all three reactors on the site are in partial meltdown. Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (Nisa) confirmed that it had detected the presence of radioactive elements cesium-137 and iodine-131, byproducts of a meltdown, in the vicinity of the No. 1 reactor.

The authorities have begun taking the drastic measure of pumping sea water into the three reactors in a bid to stop further heating at Fukushima and have warned that further explosions may occur.

The use of seawater indicates how serious the situation is, since it blocks any further commercial use of the reactors. They have been written off in a last-ditch effort to prevent an even greater disaster.

By Monday morning Japan time it was being reported that a total of six reactors along Japan's northeast Pacific coast were experiencing breakdowns in their cooling systems, with technicians forced to declare states of emergency or use emergency backups. Another six nuclear reactors have been shut down as a precautionary measure while they are inspected for earthquake damage.

John Large, the engineer who led the risk assessment team for the raising of the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk, told British Channel 4 News that the full extent of the danger may become apparent only over the next few days. He said that an explosion at the second Fukushima reactor would pose a greater risk because it is an "MOX" reactor, using "mixed oxides" containing plutonium for fuel. He warned that a radioactive release from a Chernobyl-type incident takes several days to develop, and by that time the wind could be in a southerly direction, taking any emission cloud towards Tokyo and its 20 million inhabitants.

Like other major natural disasters of the past decade—the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, Cyclone Nargis, the floods in Pakistan, the earthquakes in Haiti, Kashmir, and Wenchuan (China)—the catastrophe in Japan is a world event. It has evoked a worldwide outpouring of sympathy

for the victims and survivors. And through the prism of a terrible natural calamity, it has illuminated the contradictions of the capitalist social order in which it takes place.

The nuclear power industry in Japan, as throughout the world, is conducted on the basis of private profit, giving the corporate owners, suppliers and operators a continuing incentive to cut corners on safety in order to fatten their bottom line—especially since special government waivers free the industry of financial liability in the event of a catastrophe.

The Fukushima reactor is based on a 40-year-old design by General Electric, now much less than state-of-the art. This outmoded design is replicated at a half dozen other nuclear facilities in Japan and at least 21 in the United States, including the Toms River, New Jersey power reactor, 55 miles east of Philadelphia and 90 miles south of Manhattan.

The operator of the Fukushima complex, Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO), has a poor record of compliance with safety procedures. In 2003, all 17 of its nuclear plants were shut down temporarily in a scandal over falsified inspection reports. Another scandal over falsified data emerged in 2006.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Critics have long expressed deep concern about safety at many of Japan’s nuclear facilities, some of which date back to the 1970s and 1980s. Fukushima has long been on critics’ radar, but so has the Hamaoka plant, just 100 miles southwest of Tokyo, which perches on an active fault line.”

Japanese seismologist Katsuhiko Ishibashi of Kobe University resigned from a committee setting safety guidelines for nuclear reactors in 2005 because his concerns over building nuclear reactors on earthquake fault lines were being ignored. He told the *Times*, “Japan is an earthquake-prone archipelago, and lining its waterfront are 54 nuclear plants. It’s been like a suicide bomber wearing grenades around his belt.”

The heavy reliance of Japan on nuclear power—the 54 plants account for 30 percent of current power generation, a figure that is projected to rise to 50 percent by 2030 as more plants are built—is the byproduct of decisions made by the Japanese ruling elite over the past four decades. In 1973, when an Arab-Israeli war triggered an oil embargo by the OPEC countries, staggering the world economy and particularly Japan, nuclear power made up only a small fraction of Japan’s energy supply.

As the World Nuclear Alliance notes on its web site, “Japan was dependent on fossil fuel imports, particularly oil from the Middle East (oil fuelled 66 percent of the electricity in 1974). This geographical and commodity vulnerability became critical due to the oil shock in 1973. Re-evaluation of domestic energy policy resulted in diversification and, in

particular, a major nuclear construction program. A high priority was given to reducing the country’s dependence on oil imports.”

In a rationally planned global economy, the placement of dozens of nuclear power plants on the most active geological fault zone on the planet—and in one of the most densely populated regions—would be considered an act of gross negligence, if not insanity. But in the capitalist economy of rival nation-states, it was imperative for the Japanese bourgeoisie to secure an adequate domestic energy supply, as the country has little oil and gas and insufficient coal.

Moreover, the Japanese ruling class had previous experiences with energy crises well before 1973. As far back as World War II, one of the major driving forces of the decision of Japanese imperialism to launch preemptive war against the United States was the Roosevelt administration’s embargo of US supplies of fuel and scrap metal in retaliation for Japanese inroads into China.

Despite the admitted technological prowess of Japan, the world leader in adapting construction methods to the earthquake-proofing of its buildings, as well as the high degree of preparedness of the population, this natural disaster has laid bare not only tectonic fault lines, but social ones.

Both the profit system and the capitalist nation-state are incapable of ensuring the safety, health and wellbeing of the world’s people, even in a country as advanced as Japan. Only the adoption of a truly scientific and global perspective—based on the abolition of capitalism and the nation-state and the establishment of a rationally planned and socially owned economy on a world scale—offers a way forward for mankind.

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