

Who is responsible for the nuclear catastrophe in Japan?

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Four nuclear reactors are in various stages of crisis and possible meltdown in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that have devastated the northeastern coastline of Japan. The official death toll hit 3,373 Wednesday morning, Japan time, but that figure is expected to climb to more than 10,000.

Explosions have occurred in three of the reactors in the complex at Fukushima. The fourth has suffered two major fires in its cooling pool, which stores spent nuclear fuel rods. Significant radiation leaks have been reported, with measurable effects as far away as Tokyo, a metropolitan area of more than 20 million people.

The Japanese prime minister declared that the country faces its greatest disaster since Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The US and international media have used words like “catastrophe” to describe the conditions in Japan, pointing out that the Japanese nuclear breakdown could ultimately exceed Chernobyl in its long-term impact.

In a particularly chilling article, the *New York Times* recalled a 1997 study by the Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island that analyzed the potential consequences of an uncontrolled disaster involving spent fuel in a reactor cooling pool. According to the *Times*, “It estimated 100 quick deaths would occur within a range of 500 miles and 138,000 eventual deaths. The study also found that land over 2,170 miles would be contaminated and damages would hit \$546 billion. That section of the Brookhaven study focused on boiling water reactors—the kind at the heart of the Japanese crisis.”

The 9.0 earthquake near Sendai, the worst ever to hit Japan, was a product of nature, and the tidal wave that struck the coast was its immediate and unavoidable consequence. But the ensuing nuclear events are the results of social forces, not the collision of tectonic plates. Once again, the capitalist system has brought the world to the brink of disaster, and in the process the corporate ruling elite has demonstrated its complete recklessness

and irresponsibility.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out (“The implications of the Japanese catastrophe”), the Japanese ruling elite made a heavy bet on nuclear power to offset the country’s dependence on imported oil, despite the obvious dangers in locating more than 50 nuclear reactors near the most active earthquake fault line in the world.

This is not merely a Japanese phenomenon. Over the past 40 years there have been repeated warnings of the danger of nuclear technology, as well as a series of incidents—Windscale, Fermi I, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl—that demonstrated the real-life consequences for millions of people. But nothing could stop the drive by the capitalist ruling elites of one country after another from investing billions in nuclear power generation.

In the United States, there are more than a dozen nuclear reactors that have a similar potential for catastrophe. Two nuclear power complexes in California, Diablo Canyon and San Onofre, are located near the San Andreas Fault. An Ohio plant was knocked out of service in 1986 by an earthquake along a spur of the New Madrid fault, and another in that state was damaged by a tornado.

There are numerous reactors in coastal parts of Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina, all areas that have been struck by major hurricanes.

The Waterford nuclear power plant in Louisiana was forced to declare an “unusual event” and close down during Hurricane Katrina, although it was nearly 100 miles from where the storm made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Hurricane Gustav struck the nearby River Bend plant in St. Francisville, Louisiana.

Florida Power & Light operates the Turkey Point nuclear reactor on Biscayne Bay, just south of Miami, a site that, according to one study, “experiences tropical storms about every two years and hurricane-force winds once every seven years.” In 1992, the eye of Hurricane Andrew passed directly over the plant, causing extensive

damage and cutting off outside power supplies for five days. If the storm surge had disabled the emergency power, Turkey Point would have been in the same condition as Fukushima today.

None of this diminishes the Obama administration's enthusiasm for nuclear power. With no way of knowing the eventual scale of the worsening disaster in Japan, Energy Secretary Steven Chu on Tuesday reaffirmed to a congressional subcommittee the US commitment to provide \$39 billion in loan guarantees to underwrite the construction of new nuclear power plants. This follows three decades—since Three Mile Island—in which such construction had come to a halt.

Recklessness in locating nuclear power plants is a global phenomenon. Turkey has built its Akkuyu Bay reactor near the active Ececi fault line. China, soon to be the fourth-largest nuclear power generator, with 27 plants under construction, is one of the most seismically active countries in the world.

The densely populated countries of Western Europe are heavily reliant on nuclear power, led by France, with 58 plants. Britain has 19, Germany 17, Sweden 10, tiny Belgium 7, Switzerland 5. Canada has 18 nuclear power plants, 16 of them in southern Ontario, where a disaster would result in the radioactive contamination of the Great Lakes, the world's largest supply of fresh water.

Both the potential for natural disaster and the dangerous proximity to large population centers have been brushed aside. Such concerns mean nothing to powerful corporate and financial interests pursuing the profits from power generation or imperialist governments seeking to ensure energy supplies in an increasingly competitive global environment.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US and other imperialist powers have warned incessantly of the danger of nuclear terrorism. Bush National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice famously invoked the specter of a “mushroom cloud” if the US did not immediately invade Iraq and deprive Saddam Hussein of “weapons of mass destruction.”

The events in Japan show that the main danger of nuclear devastation comes from the workings of the capitalist economic system, not terrorism. It is Tokyo Electric Power (TEPCO), Toshiba and General Electric whose operations are today threatening to lay waste to Japan.

TEPCO is notorious in Japan for its record of covering up safety problems at its nuclear reactors. Toshiba built the Fukushima complex from a design by General Electric

that, according to the *New York Times*, was marketed as “cheaper and easier to build—in part because they used a comparatively smaller and less expensive containment structure.”

The last decade has seen disaster after disaster produced by the capitalist system: colonialist wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the destruction of New Orleans when the levees failed during Hurricane Katrina; the greatest financial collapse in world history, plunging the world into economic slump; the poisoning of the Gulf of Mexico by BP. No corporate CEO or capitalist politician has been held responsible for any of these calamities.

These events reveal the intrinsic anarchy of the capitalist system and criminal irresponsibility of the capitalist class: failure to plan, failure to build or maintain necessary social infrastructure, failure to enforce safety regulations. The labor of the international working class has produced greater wealth than at any time in history, but these resources are not available to meet social needs because all of economic life is subordinated to the get-rich mania of the ruling elite.

Working people must draw the necessary conclusions from the catastrophes which the world capitalist system is producing. The vast economic resources of modern society must be taken out of the hands of the financial aristocracy and put at the disposal of the entire population. Rational planning must replace the anarchy of the market. The harmonious development of the world economy must replace the struggle of rival nation-states. This means the struggle for international socialism.

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