

Nuclear power, private ownership and the profit system

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Nearly a fortnight after Japan's north east coast was devastated by a massive earthquake and tsunami, the country and wider region remain under threat from the nuclear disaster in Fukushima. Radioactive contamination is leaking from at least one of the reactor cores, while the state of the highly toxic spent fuel rods stored in water pools remains unclear. Authorities have now warned the 13 million people of Tokyo not to allow their children to drink the irradiated water supply.

Damning information continues to emerge about the substandard design and operation of the Fukushima plant, the appalling safety record of its corporate operator, the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), and the negligent emergency response of the Japanese government.

What is revealed at every level are the destructive consequences of the profit system. In Japan, as internationally, the social needs of the population—including the need for a safe and environmentally sustainable energy system—are subordinated to the financial interests of the major corporations.

From the very first moments of the crisis at Fukushima, when the tsunami destroyed the nuclear facility's backup power generators after sweeping over the inadequate coastal seawalls, considerations of corporate profit overrode those of public safety.

It is now known that TEPCO, the fourth largest power company in the world, considered dousing one of the plant's reactors with seawater as early as the morning of March 12, less than 24 hours after the quake struck, but delayed taking action for hours and began pumping seawater into other reactors only on March 13. Corporate executives hesitated to take the basic precautionary measure, which may have prevented any radiation from leaking, because seawater

corrodes reactors. TEPCO temporised for fear of seeing its multi billion-dollar asset written off.

Despite this act of criminal negligence, the Japanese government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan has continued to allow TEPCO to remain in charge of the nuclear emergency response. This decision provides a stark demonstration of the extraordinary power that major corporations wield over governments, which today serve openly as their servile handmaidens.

This is not something peculiar to Japan. In the US, for example, the Obama administration was prostrate before oil giant BP in the aftermath of last year's Gulf of Mexico spill. In that disaster, as with Fukushima, the corporate criminals responsible for the environmental catastrophe were authorised to command the emergency response.

The Japanese government's deference to TEPCO resulted in other critical delays. Fire-fighting and military resources were not fully deployed for cool-down operations until March 16, days after the first signs of a possible meltdown. A military spokesman said forces did not move in because they were not requested by TEPCO.

There is substantial evidence indicating that the Fukushima facility, commissioned in 1971, ought never to have been constructed how and where it was. Situated on Japan's eastern coast, the plant was designed to withstand a tsunami only up to 5.7 metres high. The March 11 tsunami hit the Fukushima coastline at an estimated height of nearly 15 metres. The plant's backup power generators were not designed to withstand an inundation and immediately failed, triggering the overheating of the reactor core and spent fuel rods.

The Fukushima facility's "Mark 1" reactor containment vessels, which are supposed to prevent

radiation from spewing into the atmosphere in the event of a failure of the cooling system, have for decades been denounced as unsafe by leading nuclear scientists and engineers. In the 1980s, one official with the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission concluded that there was a 90 percent chance that Mark 1 containment vessels would fail in the event of a meltdown. Despite this, the vessels continue to be used in Japan and internationally, including in the US, where they have been authorised for ongoing use for at least another two decades.

The nuclear industry internationally provides an object lesson in the destructive consequences of capitalism's division of the world into rival nation states. In post-World War II Japan, the ruling elite strove to mitigate its dependence on oil imports, following the devastating embargo imposed by Washington in the 1930s.

Japan is one of the most seismically active regions on the planet and therefore one of the least safe for nuclear facilities. However, basic considerations of public safety were sidelined as the country's bourgeoisie attempted to develop energy self-sufficiency through nuclear power. At the same time, right-wing nationalist elements promoted the industry with a view towards having a Japanese nuclear weapons arsenal readily available.

Within a rationally planned world socialist economy, the potential utilisation of nuclear power would be based on the long-term interests of the world's population and the planet's eco-system. The matter would be subject to the widest debate among ordinary people, based on comprehensive and objective assessments by leading nuclear scientists and energy experts. Nuclear power may have great potential as a powerful and stable source of electricity that does not generate greenhouse gas emissions and is significantly less expensive than many renewable energy alternatives—but it also comes with complex and potentially calamitous safety issues.

The problem is not nuclear power per se, but the social and economic order under which it is developed. So long as nuclear power remains the province of private corporations and the market, the health of the environment and the safety of humankind will be subordinated to the drive for profit and enrichment of executives and big shareholders. Only under public

ownership and democratic control by the working population—i.e., under socialism—is the safe harnessing and development of nuclear power conceivable.

Moreover, a rational debate on the future of the nuclear industry is hardly possible under the existing socio-economic system. The major nuclear corporations internationally have a network of bought-and-paid-for representatives in the media, scientific institutes and universities, and in government. Considerations of profit and rival nationalist interests dominate at every step.

In the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown, the universal conclusion drawn by the American media was that the disaster demonstrated the failure of the Soviet Union's social and political system. Unsurprisingly, no such lessons are being drawn about the Fukushima catastrophe. Yet what has emerged in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan amounts to another damning indictment of capitalism. The profit system has been responsible for disaster after disaster—economic, social, and ecological. Its overthrow by the international working class has never been posed with such urgency.

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