

Japan's TEPCO: a history of nuclear disaster cover-ups

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The Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) is the conglomerate at the centre of Japan's nuclear radiation emergency at Fukushima. Its operations over the past several decades epitomise the government-backed pursuit of corporate profit, at the direct expense of lives, health and safety.

TEPCO is the fourth largest power company in the world, and the biggest in Asia, operating 17 nuclear reactors and supplying one-third of Japan's electricity. It has a long, documented history of serious safety breaches, systemic cover-ups of potentially fatal disasters, persecution of whistleblowers, suppression of popular opposition and use of its economic and advertising clout to silence criticism.

Among the company's record of more than 200 proven falsifications of safety inspection reports are several relating to the stricken Fukushima Daiichi facility itself. In 2002, TEPCO admitted to falsifying reports about cracks that had been detected in core shrouds at reactors number 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, as far back as 1993.

The current crisis at Fukushima, caused by last Friday's magnitude 9 earthquake, is not the company's first quake-related breakdown. In 2007, a much smaller 6.8-magnitude tremor caused a fire and radiation leaks that shut down TEPCO's seven-reactor Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant, the world's biggest. The company later admitted that the plant had not been built to withstand such shocks.

TEPCO's record is a case study in the complicity of successive Japanese governments and regulatory agencies over the past 40 years in the safety failures of nuclear power companies. With the backing of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which ruled Japan virtually continuously from 1955, when it was formed, to 2009, the business elite aggressively pursued the construction of more than 50 nuclear plants over the objections of residents and environmentalists, in order to secure the energy needs of Japanese capitalism, despite the patent dangers of doing so in one of the world's most earthquake-prone zones.

The known nuclear cover-ups—undoubtedly just the tip of the iceberg—began to emerge in 1995. In that year, an official falsification of the extent of a sodium leak and fire at the Japan Atomic Energy Agency's Monju fast-breeder reactor caused public outrage. It was revealed that Power Reactor and Nuclear Fuel Development Corporation (PNC), the agency then in charge of Monju, had altered reports, edited a videotape taken immediately after the accident, and issued a gag order to employees. After a long series of court battles, the government allowed the reactor to restart last year.

In 1999, one of Japan's worst nuclear accidents occurred at the Tokaimura uranium processing plant, 120 kilometres north of Tokyo. An uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction at the plant, operated by JCO, a subsidiary of Sumitomo Metal Mining, killed two employees and

leaked radioactivity over the countryside. Fifty-five workers were exposed to radiation and 300,000 people ordered to stay indoors, after the circumvention of safety standards caused a leak. Government officials later said safety equipment at the plant had been missing.

Three years later, TEPCO was exposed as falsifying safety data, including at the ageing Fukushima Daiichi facility. Initially, the company admitted 29 cases of falsification. Eventually, however, it admitted to 200 occasions, over more than two decades between 1977 and 2002, involving the submission of false technical data to authorities. According to the Nuclear Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), TEPCO had attempted to hide cracks in reactor vessel shrouds in 13 units, including Fukushima Daiichi (6 reactors), Fukushima Daini (4 reactors), and Kashiwazaki-Kariwa (7 reactors).

TEPCO's wrongdoings were only revealed as a result of whistleblowing by a former engineer at General Electric (GE), a company with close connections to TEPCO. GE built the plants and has been contracted by TEPCO to carry out inspection and operational matters for decades. Two years earlier, the engineer had reported the safety frauds to the relevant ministry, MITI, the forerunner of the current Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), only to have the government supply his name to TEPCO and conspire with the company to bury the information.

Hitachi, which conducted the air tightness checks for TEPCO, was also implicated in the manipulation of test results. On two occasions, the pressure readings in Fukushima's No 1 reactor were unstable, so workers were instructed to inject air into the container to make it appear that pressure was being maintained.

Nevertheless, relying on TEPCO's own calculations, NISA maintained that there should be no problem regarding the safety of the plants. The agency inspects nuclear plants only every 13 months, and leaves the inspection of the shrouds and pumps around the reactor cores to each company.

The LDP government feigned concern at these blatant safety breaches, with Seiji Murat, Vice Minister for Economy, Trade and Industry, declaring the company had "betrayed the public's trust over nuclear energy". TEPCO's senior executives duly resigned, and their successors formally pledged to take all necessary measures to prevent any further fraud. By the end of 2005, generation had been restarted at all suspended plants, with government approval.

A little over a year later, in March 2007, the company announced

that an internal investigation had revealed a large number of unreported incidents. These included an unexpected unit criticality in 1978 and additional systematic false reporting, which had not been uncovered in 2002. Once more, the firm was publicly remorseful. “We apologise from the bottom of our heart for causing anxiety to the public and local residents,” TEPCO vice president Katsutoshi Chikudate said. The company was permitted to keep operating.

Several months later, in July 2007, the 6.8 quake that shut down TEPCO’s Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant demonstrated the real nature of the company’s assurances. The earthquake, 10 kilometres offshore from the Honshu west coast plant, caused subsidence of the main structure, ruptured water pipes, started a fire that took five hours to extinguish, and triggered radioactive discharges into the atmosphere and sea. The company initially said there was no release of radiation, but admitted later that the quake had released radiation and had spilled radioactive water into the Sea of Japan. Seismologist Katsuhiko Ishibashi warned that had the epicentre been 10 kilometres to the southwest and at magnitude 7, Kashiwazaki City would have experienced a major emergency.

Amid a public outcry, the government again put on a display of anger. According to media reports, a senior Japanese government official hauled TEPCO’s president into his office “for a rare and humiliating verbal caning”. The official was “furious” because TEPCO management had “initially misled his officials—and not for the first time, either—about the extent of breakdowns at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa”.

The 2007 closure of TEPCO’s largest nuclear plant contributed to the company posting its first ever losses over the past two years. It is now the world’s most indebted utility, with current net borrowings of \$88 billion. This financial crisis has driven management to slash costs and boost output from its other plants, no doubt also at the expense of safety. TEPCO’s “2020 Vision” document pledges to “accelerate cost reduction efforts” and raise the non-fossil fuel (mainly nuclear) proportion of its generation from 33 to 50 percent.

The current meltdown and radiation emergency at Fukushima is the inevitable product of the protracted record of TEPCO-government collaboration, which is being continued by the present Democratic Party of Japan administration. Prime Minister Naoto Kan, like his LDP predecessors, has publicly professed outrage at TEPCO’s repeated cover-ups in this latest—and by far the most serious—disaster. Reuters reported: “Japan’s prime minister was furious with executives at a power company at the centre of the nuclear crisis for taking so long to inform his office about a blast at its stricken reactor complex, demanding ‘what the hell is going on?’”.

Kan’s “fury” is purely for public consumption. In recent months, the Kan government has stepped up a campaign to help Japanese power companies, led by TEPCO, to win contracts to build nuclear reactors overseas. As part of that push, METI, the parent ministry of the nuclear safety agency NISA, has boasted that Japan maintains a “healthy regulatory environment”. Last August, TEPCO chairman Tsunehisa Katsumata, together with other Japanese power company executives, was part of a delegation, headed by then METI minister, Masayuki Naoshima, which signed deals to build two nuclear reactors in Vietnam.

With the government’s backing, TEPCO also remains closely interlocked with other giant Japanese companies. Just weeks ago, on February 23, TEPCO and Mitsubishi Corporation formed a partnership to take over the management of Electricity Generating Public Company Limited (EGCO), one of the largest power companies in Thailand.

The company’s recent expansion extends to the US. In May 2010, TEPCO announced an agreement for the planned enlargement of the South Texas Project nuclear plant, in partnership with Nuclear Innovation North America LLC (NINA), a nuclear development company jointly owned by NRG Energy, Inc. and Toshiba.

Within Japan, TEPCO is planning to open six new nuclear reactors, including units 7 and 8 of the Fukushima Daiichi plant (in 2014 and 2015), and units 1 and 2 of the Higashidori plant, facing the Pacific Ocean in northern Japan (in 2015 and 2018). Last month, residents protested as the company commenced construction, in the dark of night, on two nuclear plants at Iwai Island, in the Inland Sea south of Honshu, Japan’s main island, and close to Kyushu island, where a volcano burst this week.

Scenes of the Iwai Island protest were broadcast on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s 7.30 television program on March 15. The footage was recorded by documentary film-maker Hitomi Kamanaka, who resigned from the state broadcaster NHK after it refused to run her material criticising the country’s nuclear power companies.

TEPCO has been shielded by governments and the media for decades because, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out (“The implications of the Japanese catastrophe”), the Japanese ruling elite turned to the breakneck development of nuclear power in the late 1960s and early 1970s to shield itself from dependence on imported oil. Now more than 40 years-old, TEPCO’s Fukushima Daiichi plant was the very first to begin operational generation, on March 26, 1970.

TEPCO’s litany of deliberate violations of the most elementary safety standards, enabled by the collusion of one government after another, is a graphic demonstration of the intolerable danger posed to the world’s population by the capitalist economic order itself, based as it is on the extraction of private profit at all costs.



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