

Untrained labourers working in Japan's nuclear industry

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For decades, Japan's nuclear power industry has claimed to be among the safest in the world and presented itself as an icon of the technological prowess of Japanese capitalism. The radiation crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi plant since the March 11 earthquake and tsunami has exposed not only inadequate safety procedures, but the industry's exploitation of untrained and low-paid casual labourers.

Nuclear plants in Japan hire thousands of temporary and contract workers to undertake the most dangerous and physically demanding duties. In order to avoid exceeding official radiation levels, these labourers must rotate frequently as they perform tasks such as cleaning off contaminated water from reactor drywells and spent fuel pools with mops and rags, or filling drums with contaminated waste.

Citing statistics from the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), the official government regulator, the *New York Times* reported on April 9 that contract workers made up 88 percent of the 83,000 workers at Japan's 18 commercial nuclear power plants. At the Fukushima plant, owned by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), 89 percent of the 10,303 workers were contractors, subcontractors and sub-subcontractors, whose wages and conditions were generally far worse than those of TEPCO's regular employees.

Construction site workers, local farmers who desperately needed extra income, and unemployed workers formed the bulk of the workforce. The *New York Times* spoke to half a dozen current and former workers, most of whom refused to give their names for the fear of reprisal. The newspaper reported that workers were trying "to hide injuries to avoid trouble for their employers" and used "skin-coloured adhesive bandages to cover up cuts

and bruises" in order to retain their jobs.

One worker explained that labourers were given dosimeters to measure radiation exposure, but all wanted to avoid reaching the daily limit because "once you reach the limit, there is no more work". Hourly based-wages provided an incentive for workers to continue for as long as possible, despite the risk of radiation harm.

Takeshi Kawakami, a 64-year-old former worker who worked at the No.1 reactor at Fukushima in the 1980s, told the newspaper that when exposed to radiation he usually did not last 20 minutes. "It was unbearable, and you had your mask on, and it was so tight," he said. "I started feeling dizzy. I could not even see what I was doing. I thought I would drown in my own sweat."

Kawakami had been diagnosed with stomach and intestinal cancer. Since the mid-1970s, about 50 former workers had received workers' compensation after developing leukemia or other forms of cancer. Health experts and lawyers said many more workers were suffering health problems, but it was often difficult to prove a direct link to their nuclear work.

Nuclear power plant operators have suppressed reports of radiation exposure for decades, including by coercing workers not to inform government inspectors. Tetsuen Nakajima, a priest who had formed a small union of day workers in the 1980s, told the *New York Times* that union members had demanded that plant operators stop forging radiation exposure records and forcing employees to lie to inspectors. Thugs had soon visited union leaders, threatening to harm their families. Nakajima commented: "Once you enter a nuclear power plant, everything's a secret."

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The *Asahi Shimbun* reported this week that TEPCO relying on about 700 such workers in the daily struggle to contain the Fukushima catastrophe. Most of the workforce had been evacuated on March 11 but many had been lured back to work with offers of wages of up to \$US1,000 a day, depending on the tasks and radiation risks involved each day.

Last month, at Prime Minister Naoto Kan’s request, Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare lifted the annual radiation dosage limit for the workers inside Fukushima to 250 millisieverts, 2.5 times the previous limit. The ministry specifically attributed the change to the fact that the existing national safety standard had made it “impossible to extract enough work time from the workers employed to cool down the nuclear reactors” at Fukushima.

“At Fukushima 1, the level of radiation is 400 millisieverts per hour,” the state news agency NHK explained. “The previous limit of 100 millisieverts means that workers can work for only 15 minutes; the new limit of 250 millisieverts means that they can work for 30 minutes.” The ministry justified the alteration as “an emergency measure,” requested by Kan, to “prevent this nuclear disaster from escalating”. The fact remains that, as a result of the crisis, the workers hired by TEPCO are being deliberately exposed to potentially dangerous radiation levels.

TEPCO’s emergency response was so poor that initially there were insufficient dosimeters to even measure radiation levels, and about 180 workers were engaged without them. Two weeks ago, two workers suffered radiation burns when working in radioactive water without proper boots.

According to the *Asahi Shimbun*, at the start of the nuclear crisis, workers were living in poor conditions, fed just biscuits and vegetable juice in the morning and canned foods and emergency rice at night, and sleeping on floors between shifts. Only weeks later were workers given three meals a day and accommodation in facilities located away from the plant.

A worker who had been dispatched to Fukushima by one of TEPCO’s partners told the Japanese newspaper that he did not want to go there. “But if I reject the request, I will lose my job,” he explained. He said his daily pay was less than 20,000 yen (\$236). “I hear that some construction workers were employed at a wage of several tens of thousands of yen per hour. But we are

Although the workers at the plant have made heroic sacrifices in an effort to save the population from a nuclear meltdown, they are victims of the corporate interests of TEPCO, which is taking advantage of Japan’s growing army of impoverished temporary workers.

Japan today has more than 17 million “irregular” workers, representing one third of the workforce, compared to 15 percent in 1984. The system of lifetime employment once used by major corporations has been systematically eroded as the result of two decades of economic stagnation and competition from low-wage rivals, such as China.

While the nuclear power plants have been using temporary workers for decades, large manufacturers from Toyota to Panasonic now also heavily depend on low-paid “flexible” workers. So-called “dispatch” workers average only half the wage of permanent employees, while foreign “trainees” from China or Vietnam earn as little as \$3.30 per hour.

The temp workers were the first to be shed during the 2008-09 global financial crisis, when a total of 440,000 lost their jobs. Increasingly, contract workers function as a ready reserve of cheap labour, allowing the corporate elite to push down wages for the entire working class. In 2009, real wages fell nearly 3 percent in Japan, the third straight year of decline.

The plight of TEPCO’s workforce underscores the extent to which every aspect of the nuclear industry is subordinated to private profit at the expense of the well-being of workers, as well as public health and the environment.



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