

The Fukushima nuclear disaster—three months on

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Three months after the March 11 earthquake that devastated northern Japan, the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant is far from over. Yet the worst nuclear disaster since the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown in the Ukraine has all but disappeared from the media, amid a concerted effort to play down its implications and cover up the underlying causes.

Some 2,500 workers and engineers are still struggling to bring three crippled reactors to a state of “cold shutdown”—optimistically projected for early next year. The full extent of the damage still remains unknown, but the plant operator, Tokyo Electric Company (TEPCO), finally acknowledged last month that the cores of all three reactors had undergone a serious meltdown. The exact location of the melted fuel and the extent of reactor containment breaches are unclear, posing the ongoing danger of further radiation leakage.

Jerry-rigged reactor cooling systems, improvised in the immediate hours after the quake and tsunami cut power to the plant and rendered back-up systems inoperable, are still being used. Water pumped into the reactors is not being recycled but is seeping out and generating more contaminated waste water. Currently, more than 100,000 tonnes of highly radioactive water sits in makeshift storage facilities, as well as building basements and trenches. This buildup is expected to almost double in quantity by the end of the year.

An entire 20-kilometre zone around the plant has been evacuated, along with other towns at greater distances. New “hot spots” were identified last week. Together with many others displaced by the quake and tsunami, around 80,000 “nuclear refugees” are either staying in emergency shelters, with friends and

relatives or in rented accommodation. Their life is particularly grim as they have little prospect of returning to their homes and places of work in the near future.

The crisis produced an outpouring of sympathy and assistance from working people in Japan and internationally. In ruling circles, however, it has generated an extraordinary exercise of damage control on the part of TEPCO, the media, the government and nuclear regulatory authorities, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Even as media coverage dwindles, disturbing information continues to emerge about the extent of the catastrophe. Last week, Japan’s Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) doubled its estimate for the amount of radioactivity released in the first week of the crisis from 370,000 to 770,000 terabecquerels, while conceding that the meltdown of the reactor cores was worse than previously admitted.

NISA had reported the widespread release of radioactive iodine and caesium. Last week, however, the nuclear regulator confirmed the presence of radioactive strontium at 240 times the legal limit in seawater near the plant, as well as in groundwater near reactors 1 and 2. Japan’s NHK news reported the presence of strontium-90, which can cause bone cancer and leukaemia, at 11 sites in the Fukushima prefecture.

Despite its long record of safety breaches and cover-ups, TEPCO has been left in charge of stabilising the Fukushima plant. Its objective is obvious from the contempt with which it treats the workforce at the plant. The vast majority are hired by subcontractors,

have little or no training and experience, do the more dangerous work and are paid about one-third the wage of full-time employees. Eight workers at the Fukushima plant have been found to have received a radiation dose of more than 250 millisieverts—the new legal limit, raised from 100 millisieverts after March 11.

For TEPCO, its overriding priority is financial survival, not the safety of its workforce or the wider population. Shares in one of Asia's largest utilities have slumped to 148 yen (\$US1.85), down 93 percent from pre-earthquake levels, and its bonds have been relegated by the international rating agency Standard & Poor's to junk status. TEPCO is expecting a government bailout to pay compensation to the tens of thousands of people and businesses impacted by the disaster.

For Prime Minister Naoto Kan's government, it is a matter of political survival. His poll ratings have slumped to record lows amid widespread disapproval of his handling of the nuclear crisis, and moves within the ruling party to dump him. Last week, the government announced a shake-up of the country's nuclear regulatory agencies that would separate NISA from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), which is also responsible for promoting the nuclear industry.

These cosmetic changes will do little to alter the incestuous relationship between Japan's regulators and energy giants like TEPCO. There is a well-worn path trodden by senior NISA and METI officials from the state bureaucracy into corporate boardrooms. NISA's response to the latest revelation that eight TEPCO employees had received radiation doses above the legal limit was typical. The agency described the situation as "extremely regrettable" and issued a formal warning to TEPCO—in other words, a slap on the wrist, as it has done on previous occasions.

The cover-up is not confined to Japan, however. On June 1, the IAEA issued an interim report on the Fukushima disaster that listed the most obvious deficiencies in TEPCO's safety measures but had nothing but praise for the official response. It said the government, regulatory agencies and the company had

been "extremely open" in sharing information. TEPCO management at the site had been "exemplary" under arduous conditions. The government's protection of the public had been "impressive and extremely well organised".

The purpose of this IAEA whitewash was elaborated quite openly by deputy director general Denis Flory, who told the media: "There is a need to rebuild the confidence of the public towards their government, when their governments have decided to use nuclear energy." Like Japan's regulatory authorities, the IAEA is intimately bound up with the nuclear industry, which is expanding internationally and is tasked with regulating energy giants that are driven by profit, not the welfare of ordinary people.

The Fukushima disaster has revealed once again the dangerous consequences of subordinating social need to private profit. The nuclear industry is also intimately connected to the military requirements of the capitalist state. It is not nuclear technology as such that presents the danger, but the profit system under which it has developed. The only possible way in which nuclear energy could be safely harnessed would be under public ownership and the democratic control of the working people—that is, under socialism.



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