

Mass protest in Tokyo against nuclear power

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Some 60,000 people marched through downtown Tokyo on Monday in the largest rally against the nuclear power industry and the Japanese government since the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant meltdown following the March 11 earthquake and tsunami.

It was one of the largest protests on Japan's main island in recent years, pointing to growing social discontent with not only the inadequate official response to the disasters, but the government's austerity measures and the fall in living standards since the global financial crisis began in 2008. In 2003, protests opposing the US invasion of Iraq drew some 50,000 people.

Hot and humid weather did not deter ordinary people from voicing their anger and concern. The *Japan Times* observed: "The huge turnout even surprised the participants, hinting that the crisis had finally stirred something in the nation's normally passive psyche."

Kayo Nimura, a woman in her 40s from Tokyo, told the newspaper that she had not been concerned by the danger of nuclear power until the March 11 events. "Because of what happened, I did some study and found out that many things appear sceptical, such as TEPCO's [the owner of the Fukushima nuclear plant] management, how electricity prices are decided and their plans for nuclear waste," she explained.

Nami Noji, 43, brought her four children to the protest. She told the Associated Press: "Radiation is scary. There is a lot of uncertainty about the safety of food, and I want the future to be safe for my kids." Demonstrators came from all over Japan. Mari Joh, a 64-year-old woman from Hitachi city who lived not far from a nuclear power plant, travelled to Tokyo to collect signatures for a petition to shut it down.

Participants initially gathered at Meiji Park to hear speeches by organisers, who have led a petition campaign since June, collecting 10 million signatures to "say goodbye to nuclear power plants." Protesters

marched through the Aoyama and Omotesando districts in the afternoon, as they made their way to Yoyogi Park. They chanted slogans such as, "We don't need nuclear power plants!" and "Tokyo Electric Power Co [TEPCO] must pay compensation to the victims."

The protests also opposed TEPCO's plans to cut the pension payouts to its employees and retirees, as part a \$US7.8 billion government bailout. While the exact scale of the overall attack on its workers is still unclear, thousands of jobs could be lost at the energy company, which has already frozen plans to hire 1,100 new graduates this year.

Speakers at the rally advanced a reformist perspective of seeking to pressure the government and major corporations to scale back the use of nuclear energy. Among them were 1994 Nobel literature prize winner Kenzaburo Oe. Calling for further demonstrations and public meetings, Oe declared: "We need to let the leaders of the major parties and the Japan Business Federation know that we intend to resist [nuclear power]."

Other prominent figures included well-known liberal artists like guitarist Kazuhisa Uchihashi, and former radicals from the anti-Vietnam War protests in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Shunsuke Tsurumi, a historian and philosopher at Kyodo University who was a member of the Citizen's League for Peace in Vietnam. The upper middle-class character of the rally's leadership was also symbolised by Tsujii Takashi, a poet and a billionaire former chairman of the powerful Seibu business group, and Japan's leading feminist figure, Keiko Ochiai, who runs a bookstore, Crayon House, selling children's and women's books.

While these layers appealed to the long-held anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan—the only country in the world to suffer atomic bombings—they do not oppose the capitalist profit system which is at the root of the mismanagement and misuse of nuclear technology. The

petition statement explicitly blamed the technology rather than capitalism, declaring: “With the issues faced by the survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still unresolved, now we have also become victims of nuclear energy... Human beings cannot coexist with nuclear.”

Such sentiments in part reflect the fears of sections of the population whose livelihoods have been threatened by the unsafe expansion of nuclear power plants. These concerns, however, are being exploited to advance the aspirations of a section of the corporate elite and wealthy middle class layers involved in the start up of “green” energy industries.

Masayoshi Son, Japan’s richest man and founder of Softbank, the country’s third largest mobile network, personifies this layer. Just days before the protest, he announced a \$US26 billion scheme for wind and geothermal power and a 1,900-kilometre “super-grid” to provide 60 percent of Japan’s energy by 2030. Son declared that his electricity network could eventually expand into China, Russia, India and other Asian countries.

The interests of the working class do not figure in the official debate on the future of nuclear energy. Amid mounting anger over the government’s response to the March 11 disasters and its cover up for TEPCO, former Prime Minister Nanto Kan sought to salvage his falling public approval rating by promising to wind back nuclear power, upon which Japan currently relies for one third of its power supply.

Kan’s successor, Yoshihiko Noda, however, immediately dumped Kan’s proposal upon taking office last month. Under heavy pressure from Japan’s struggling industrial businesses over energy shortages, Noda called for preparations to reopen a number of nuclear plants currently shut for safety inspections.

In his first appearance at the UN General Assembly this week, Noda is expected to deliver a speech that will stress the need to retain nuclear energy. A draft of his speech obtained by Kyodo newsagency last Sunday stated: “There will be a continuing necessity to secure nuclear energy that is safe and more reliable.” The draft also promised a thorough investigation of the Fukushima accident and greater use of renewable energy sources.

Noda’s pro-corporate policy is rapidly driving his administration into a collision course with the working

class over austerity measures, as well as nuclear energy. Monday’s protests just took place days after the ruling Democratic Party’s Tax Commission made proposals, approved by Noda, to increase income taxes and other taxation, including on cigarettes. The privatisation of government enterprises such as Japan Tobacco is also being prepared. These plans are designed to make the working people pay for the huge public debt, which has reached 200 percent of gross domestic product.

The mass protest in Tokyo on Monday is a sign that, as in the US and Europe, the working class in Japan, which has a long history of militancy, is starting to come into open confrontation with the government and corporate giants.



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