

Japan's triple disaster: An indictment of capitalism

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One year after Japan's triple disaster—the March 11 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown—the scenes of devastation remain. Reconstruction has barely begun in flattened coastal towns. Mountains of rubble and debris have not been cleared. The area for 20 kilometres around the crippled Fukushima nuclear plant is uninhabited and will remain so for years. Its damaged reactors will not be completely decommissioned and removed for 30 to 40 years.

The human tragedy is immense. More than 15,000 people died in the disaster and another 3,000 are still missing. Whole communities were destroyed, together with jobs, businesses and long established patterns of life. Over 300,000 people are still in temporary accommodation, attempting to rebuild their shattered lives. Many young people have been forced to leave the northern Tohoku region to look for employment elsewhere.

The natural forces unleashed on March 11, 2011 were uncontrollable, but the impact of the disaster was greatly magnified by the inadequacy of the safety and emergency procedures, the government's chaotic response and the lack of money for relief and reconstruction. The terrible consequences are an indictment of capitalism, especially as Japan is a sophisticated industrial economy, the world's third largest.

The subordination of the social needs of ordinary people to corporate profit was most graphically exposed in the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. Despite the warnings of scientists, emergency planning by the Tokyo Electric Company (TEPCO) failed to take into account a massive tsunami. The wave

swamped the plant and cut its electricity supplies, triggering a chain of events that led to a partial meltdown in three of the six reactors.

TEPCO downplayed the extent of the disaster to minimise the impact on its share prices and profits. Despite its record of safety breaches and cover-up, the government of Prime Minister Naoto Kan left the corporation in charge. A recently released report revealed that Kan and his top officials were forced to consider a worst-case scenario that involved a “demonic chain reaction” of nuclear plant meltdowns, necessitating the evacuation of 30 million people from Greater Tokyo. Yet the public was deliberately kept in the dark.

At every stage, the government put the interests of TEPCO ahead of working people. Its regulatory agencies raised the annual legal radiation dose for nuclear employees from 100 to 250 millisieverts, endangering the health of hundreds of workers battling to bring the reactors under control. It was months before the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency publicly recognised that Fukushima was second only to the 1986 explosion at Chernobyl, the world's worst nuclear catastrophe. The government has poured more than one trillion yen (\$US12 billion) into bailing out TEPCO, one of the world's largest energy corporations.

The nuclear crisis at Fukushima was symptomatic of broader processes. Despite Japan being prone to earthquakes and tsunamis, measures to protect lives proved totally inadequate. The media blamed public complacency, but many of the victims were lulled into a false sense of security. Former chief scientist at the

US National Ocean Service, Bruce Parker, pointed out recently that 40 percent of Japan's coastline is defended by sea walls, but most were not constructed to deal with a worst-case scenario. "How high to build those walls had been a financial decision," he wrote.

"There is, however, very little cost associated with designating safe evacuation areas," Parker noted. "Surprisingly, many of those supposedly safe evacuation areas were not located high enough and/or far enough inland, and many people who came to these evacuation areas died. Perhaps most important, many of the deaths were due to the fact that a large number of Japanese did not know what to do if a tsunami came."

The triple disaster has compounded the impact of the global capitalist crisis on the Japanese economy as a result of the breakdown of supply chains, the closure of plants and damage to agriculture, fishing and tourism. The economy grew by just 0.7 percent last year and is expected to grow by 2 percent this year. Reconstruction funding from the government, which is under pressure from finance capital to slash the country's huge foreign debt, has fallen well short of what is required.

Public distrust and hostility over the government's response to the disaster have added to decades of alienation from the entire political establishment. Many people in Japan rightly believe that they have been systematically lied to. Suspicion over the government's statements on radiation levels has fuelled what is known as the "measurement movement"—the widespread purchase of Geiger counters and dosimeters to independently measure radioactivity.

The ruling Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) replaced Kan as prime minister with Yoshihiko Noda last August in an effort to stem the political damage. But Noda has fared no better in the polls, in part because of his advocacy of restarting nuclear plants as soon as possible. The opposition Liberal Democratic Party is regarded with similar suspicion because its previous half-century of rule established the cosy relationship between governments and the corporate nuclear industry.

Anger over the response of the political establishment

to the disaster has at present been limited. Thousands have joined the "Goodbye nuclear" protests that blame nuclear technology, rather than the profit system, for the Fukushima nuclear catastrophe.

The political lesson that needs to be drawn from Japan's triple disaster is that capitalism has proven incapable of ameliorating the devastating impact of the forces of nature. As in the case of the Asian tsunami that wrecked havoc in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand in 2004, and Hurricane Katrina that destroyed much of New Orleans in 2005, the vital needs of working people have been sacrificed to private profit.

Only the abolition of capitalism by the international working class and the establishment of a world planned socialist economy can put an end to such tragedies.

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