

Japan's nuclear restart

Mike Head
23 June 2012

The Japanese government's rush to reactivate the country's nuclear reactors underscores the threat posed by the capitalist profit system to the safety, health and lives of the world's population.

Just a little more than a year since the March 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster—the second worst in world history—Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda's administration has ordered the re-opening of two reactors at Oi, on Japan's western shore.

The decision was clearly driven by the demands of big business, including the energy conglomerates, overriding public opposition and basic safety concerns. Other reactors are already being lined up to follow, including those operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which was responsible for the Fukushima catastrophe.

Last year's earthquake and tsunami quickly resulted in the swamping of the Fukushima plant, the failure of its emergency systems and the partial meltdown of three of its six reactors. About 87,000 residents were forced to evacuate from the surrounding areas, which have become uninhabitable, possibly for decades. At the height of the disaster, there were fears for the safety of the 35 million people living in greater Tokyo.

Such was the depth of the popular concern that all 50 of Japan's nuclear reactors were shut down by May 2011. Many were merely taken off-line for maintenance or safety upgrades, but they were unable to restart due to the widespread public distrust of the power companies and the government. This hostility has not gone away. A recent survey by national broadcaster NHK found that more than 80 percent of people in areas near Oi think that the nuclear plant may suffer a Fukushima-style accident.

The two Oi reactors sit on Wakasa Bay, a region known as Japan's "nuclear alley," home to 13 reactors. Major cities—Kyoto and Osaka—are nearby. Yet basic safety and emergency facilities are not in place. A

raised seawall to shield the reactors from tsunamis will not be ready until next year, no on-site command centre will exist until 2016, and filtered vents, which could reduce radiation leaks, will not be ready for three years.

Many of the towns in the Oi plant's expanded 30-kilometre evacuation zone still lack radiation monitoring equipment, anti-radiation medical supplies and safe evacuation routes. "If another crisis hits now, we can't do anything but flee," Kaoru Tsuchiya, a local emergency management official, told Associated Press. Across the country, there is a similar situation in 135 towns, home to nearly five million people. Local authorities are still awaiting a national disaster plan, promised for later this year.

A proposed new Nuclear Regulatory Authority has yet to be established, let alone draft revised safety guidelines. The planned body is meant to replace the discredited Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), whose cosy relations with TEPCO were exposed during the Fukushima disaster. NISA and the government left TEPCO in charge of the Fukushima emergency, despite its decades-long record of safety breaches, cover-ups and persecution of whistleblowers.

TEPCO's handling of the crisis typified the systematic subordination of the safety and well-being of ordinary working people to the interests of the financial and corporate elite. The giant electricity company ignored the warnings of scientists about the danger of a massive tsunami and then repeatedly downplayed the extent of the damage in a bid to minimise the impact on its share price and profits.

Far from being held accountable, TEPCO has been bailed out by the government to the tune of more than one trillion yen (\$US12 billion), to shield it from compensation bills and the financial costs of recommissioning reactors. This week, TEPCO indicated that nothing much had changed. It issued a report exonerating itself, denying that it hid information

during the Fukushima crisis, and claiming that no company could have predicted or prepared for the magnitude-9.0 quake and subsequent tidal wave.

The Japanese ruling elite has long protected TEPCO and the country's other nuclear generators because it turned to nuclear power four decades ago in the quest for "energy security" to offset its acute reliance on oil imports. This meant building dozens of nuclear plants along one of the most earthquake-prone fault lines on the planet. Moreover, militarist sections of the Japanese establishment see nuclear technology as vital for the capacity to develop nuclear weapons.

These underlying driving forces—corporate profit and the geo-strategic calculations flowing from the division of the world into rival nation-states—are by no means confined to Japan. Despite the dangers exposed by the Fukushima disaster, the nuclear industry has quickly resumed rapid expansion globally, amid mounting international tensions over nuclear power and other energy supplies. According to the World Nuclear Association, 61 reactors are under construction today, and more are planned, including in the US, Britain, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates, as well as China, India and Russia.

Nuclear technology itself is not the problem, but the social and economic order under which it is being developed. No credence can be given to the self-serving claims of the nuclear corporations that their only interest lies in supplying the "green energy" of the future. Nuclear power may have considerable potential as a plentiful and reliable source of electricity that does not generate greenhouse gas emissions and is less expensive than many renewable energy alternatives. But it has difficult and potentially catastrophic safety complications, and military uses, that humanity cannot afford to leave in the hands of the corporate and national elites.

Only within a rationally planned world socialist economy would the safe development and harnessing of nuclear power be conceivable. Then the potential of nuclear technology would be explored based on the long-term interests of the world's population and the global environment. Ordinary people would subject its utilisation to wide and democratic debate, taking into account careful assessments by scientists and energy experts.

The reckless and irresponsible haste with which

nuclear reactors are being reactivated and built around the world, regardless of the immense dangers revealed by the Fukushima calamity, is a damning indictment of capitalism. It must be overthrown by the international working class, to clear the way for the harmonious development of the globe's resources, making use of the vast potential of scientific and technological advances, under social ownership and democratic workers control.

Mike Head



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact