

# Fukushima: A disaster produced by capitalism

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A damning report by an independent parliamentary commission has catalogued the lack of safety measures that produced last year's Fukushima nuclear disaster. While the natural forces unleashed by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami were uncontrollable, their devastating impact was foreseeable, and could have been greatly minimised.

The giant Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which operated Fukushima Dai-ichi plant, did not reinforce its reactors to meet the required earthquake resistance standards. The regulatory body, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA), took no action to enforce the quake code. The company and the regulatory bodies were aware that the plant was vulnerable to tsunamis, but took no action. Disaster planning was inadequate or absent at every level—at the plant, TEPCO headquarters, NISA and the prime minister's office.

The result was chaos when the earthquake and tsunami struck. The plant lost all power and its backup supplies failed. Engineers and workers, who had not been trained to deal with a disaster of this scope, struggled to bring the situation under control with inadequate equipment and manuals. A series of hydrogen explosions badly damaged reactor buildings. Units 1, 2 and 3 underwent partial meltdowns, and high levels of radioactivity leaked into the sea and air. It took months to bring the reactors under control, and the full extent of the damage remains unknown. To dismantle the plant and clean up the surrounding region will take decades.

The lack of a planned response by government, NISA and TEPCO compounded the disaster, threatening what

the report circumspectly described as “an even more frightening scenario”. The evacuation of local residents was disorganised: tens of thousands of people were not adequately informed and were repeatedly moved, including into zones of high radioactivity, as the evacuation zone was successively expanded. The long-term impact of the disaster on people's health and the environment is unknown.

The nuclear catastrophe—the worst since the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown in Ukraine—was the product of decades of collusion by governments, nuclear regulators and the nuclear power industry. The report used the term “regulatory capture” to describe the relations between NISA, the Nuclear Safety Commission (NSC) and the nuclear power industry. In other words, the NISA and NSC functioned to protect the interests of companies like TEPCO, not public safety.

The Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) report, released last week, was unusually forthright. It was clearly aimed at trying to dispel the widespread public suspicion, distrust and opposition to the nuclear industry. While the commission concluded that the disaster was “man-made”—that is, the product of the negligence and deliberate flouting of basic safety standards—it held no-one accountable. It proposed no legal action against individuals or entities, including TEPCO, and limited its recommendations to general proposals for regulatory reform.

NAIIC chairman Kiyoshi Kurokawa sought to deflect responsibility for the catastrophe onto Japanese people in general. In the report's introduction, he declared:

“Its fundamental causes are to be found in the ingrained conventions of Japanese culture: our reflexive obedience; our reluctance to question authority; our devolution to ‘sticking with the program’; our groupism; and our insularity.”

These comments involve a gross distortion of reality. Experts in Japan have for years warned of the dangers of nuclear reactors sited in areas prone to earthquakes and tsunamis, and highlighted the incestuous relationship between regulators and the power industry. They have had to confront a powerful and well-financed nuclear lobby intent on protecting profits. Within TEPCO and other power companies, it was not “groupism” that silenced workers, but a management culture of bullying and threats.

Responsibility for the Fukushima disaster does not rest with ordinary Japanese people, but with the ruling class that has put the profits of the giant power companies ahead of public safety. The expansion of the nuclear industry has also been a strategic issue for Japanese imperialism—not only reducing its dependence on imported gas and oil, but providing a path to the rapid production of nuclear weapons if required.

Collusion between big business, government and industry is hardly restricted to Japan. In every country, the health and safety of working people in their workplaces and their communities are routinely subordinated to the dictates of profit. Moreover, the past three decades of market restructuring have led to the systematic erosion of the limited regulations that previously existed. In many instances, regulatory bodies have been cut back or replaced by corporate “self-regulation”.

Fukushima is just one of the major disasters that have exposed the criminal character of capitalism. One year earlier, an explosion at the BP-run Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 workers and created the worst environmental catastrophe in US history. The Bush and Obama administrations fast-tracked the project, which proceeded without an environmental impact study, despite public concern and opposition. In the wake of the oil spill, the Obama administration acted as a virtual attorney for BP,

assisting the energy giant to minimise the economic and political fallout. From the outset, the White House made clear that the disaster would not impede further offshore oil projects—including by BP.

The Japanese government, first under Prime Minister Naoto Kan, and now Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda, has performed a similar service for TEPCO—providing a huge bailout for the company and limiting the payouts to small businesses and individuals whose lives have been devastated. Last month Noda gave the go-ahead for restarting one of Japan’s nuclear reactors—without any but the most limited safety checks. On the same day that the NAICC report was released, the No 3 reactor at the Oi nuclear plant commenced operations, in a location highly prone to earthquakes.

The real lesson that should be drawn from the report’s revelations is the incompatibility between capitalism and even the most elementary needs of humanity for a healthy and secure environment. The only way of preventing tragedies such as the Fukushima disaster is through the abolition of the profit system by the international working class and the establishment of a world planned socialist economy.

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