

Washington state nuclear workers face layoffs after sequester cuts

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13 April 2013

More than 240 workers at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation (Hanford) in southeastern Washington State were laid off last month, with an additional 2,600 facing furloughs as a result of the automatic federal spending cuts (sequesters) signed into law March 1 by President Obama.

Hanford lost \$92 million in funding for the ongoing cleanup of the site as part of the \$85 billion chopped from federal spending by the end of the current fiscal year. The \$2 billion spent there annually constitutes roughly one third of the government's national cleanup costs. Additionally, the Department of Energy (DOE) estimated \$182 million in reduced funding for operations in Washington State, resulting in the layoff or furloughing of nearly 5,000 workers.

While Hanford faces the lion's share of funding cuts, cleanup operations in the rest of the nation will see cuts totaling \$420 million. Contractors in Tennessee, New Mexico, Idaho and South Carolina will also be reducing their workforces through layoffs and furloughs.

The Hanford Nuclear Reservation, situated on 600 square miles along the banks of the Columbia River, is the most contaminated nuclear site in the United States. According to the Washington State Department of Ecology, "Sixty percent by volume of the nation's high-level radioactive waste is stored at Hanford in aging deteriorating tanks. If not cleaned up, this waste is a threat to the Columbia River and the Pacific Northwest."

Created in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project, Hanford served as the main producer of plutonium for the American atomic arsenal through the Cold War until its decommissioning in 1987. Since 1988, the Hanford site has been the object of a massive cleanup effort. Around 9,000 workers are employed there to contain and dispose of the huge amount of waste

produced during its 44 years of operation.

The Hanford site was established to produce the weapons-suitable fissile isotope of plutonium, plutonium-239, from non-fissile but relatively abundant uranium-238 on a scale large enough to build atomic weapons. The material produced there was used to build the bombs tested at the Trinity site in Alamogordo, New Mexico, and, a few weeks later, the "Fat Man" bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. The majority of all the plutonium needed to build the United States nuclear arsenal during the Cold War era was produced at Hanford over the next 40 years, peaking between 1956 and 1965.

Alongside plutonium, the chemical extraction process also yielded 56 million gallons of highly toxic radioactive waste that is stored in 177 underground tanks, about a third of which have leaked in the past and six of which are reported to be leaking now. These leaks have contaminated hundreds of billions of gallons of water in nearby aquifers, and a million gallons of liquid radioactive waste are moving in a front through the ground water toward the Columbia River. The waste front could reach the major waterway in 12 to 50 years if cleanup is not completed on time. The work at Hanford centers on containing the waste by transferring it from aging leaky tanks to newer tanks, remediating the contaminated environment, and building a waste processing plant to embed the radioactive materials in glass cylinders in a process called vitrification, stabilizing them and rendering them immobile (though this has been a technical challenge and has been vulnerable to cuts).

The DOE, which oversees activities at the Hanford site, has denied that public safety will be affected by the cuts, but this is dubious. In 1986, under public pressure, the DOE disclosed documents detailing the

release for over 40 years of the radioactive gases and particles created in the production of plutonium. In addition to these releases due to routine operations, in 1949 the US Air Force deliberately released iodine-131 in a secret experiment, reportedly to test monitoring equipment designed to track the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons program. Iodine-131 is considered a significant health hazard causing cell mutation and death. (It is used medically in thyroid cancer therapy.)

As tanks continue to leak and release toxic waste into the groundwater and the nearby Columbia River faces the threat of contamination that would precipitate public health and ecological crises, workers involved in preventing this eventuality are being sidelined. Last week, reports cited concern over the buildup of explosive hydrogen gas in some of the double-shelled tanks replacing older leak-prone single-shelled tanks. The tanks could explode if not adequately ventilated, potentially spreading the contents over a wide area.

The Hanford cleanup project is a difficult and highly technical challenge of critical importance, requiring scientific planning and full funding. In the hands of the ruling class, the costly project to clean up their wartime mess faces reckless cuts. Both the Democrats and Republicans are united under the lie that there is no money for social needs like environmental cleanup, jobs, education, and health care.

The dangerous nature of nuclear technology and the critical effort to clean up contaminated sites are too important to be left to the whim of the profit motive and the haphazard efforts of bourgeois politicians. The 2011 disaster in Fukushima dramatically exposed this contradiction. Nuclear technologies hold great promise for the development of human society, but they also pose great risks. Only under the scientific discipline of socialist planning can society utilize these awesome potentials rationally and safely.



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