

Japan: Fukushima worker sues TEPCO over radiation exposure

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A worker, who was among the first to respond to the crisis at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in March 2011, has filed a legal case against the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the plant's private operator, for unnecessary exposure to high levels of radiation. The lawsuit comes amid growing anger among workers at the crippled plant, over low pay and extremely dangerous and exploitative conditions.

The 48-year-old man, whose name has not been released, filed the case at the Iwaki branch of the Fukushima District Court. It is reportedly the first such lawsuit by a Fukushima worker. "I wish [TEPCO] had informed us of possible risks in advance," he told a news conference on May 7. "I want [TEPCO] to create safer conditions for workers because the decommissioning of the reactors will not finish anytime soon."

The worker's claims add to the substantial existing evidence of the company's gross indifference towards the safety of their workforce.

On March 11, 2011, a 15-metre tsunami struck the plant, knocking out both its power supplies and the cooling systems used for its reactors and spent fuel pools. Of the plant's six reactors, three underwent partial meltdowns. Reactor buildings were badly damaged by hydrogen explosions.

The man explained that he was one of six workers who, 13 days into the crisis, were told to enter the basement of the turbine building of reactor 3 to install power cables. He said that TEPCO told the workers that the area was safe, despite knowing that highly radioactive water had leaked from reactor one.

The man stated that three of the group waded through contaminated water up to their ankles, exposing them to up to 180 millisieverts of radiation. The official limit for radiation exposure for an entire year for nuclear

workers outside an emergency is 50 millisieverts. The three men were later hospitalised.

While he was not one of the three, the worker said that he had to work next to a large puddle of contaminated water, and was exposed to up to 20 millisieverts of radiation. He is seeking compensation of \$US110,000.

The company will undoubtedly seek to prevent any legal precedent for other workers who have suffered radiation poisoning to seek compensation.

The Fukushima plant remains in crisis. Due to the failure of the reactors' cooling systems, TEPCO is pumping large amounts of water into their cores to prevent a further meltdown. As a result, huge quantities of highly radioactive water are being produced. Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of contaminated water are being stored in more than 1,000 tanks, with a plan to double the capacity by 2016. At the same time, between 300 and 400 tonnes of contaminated groundwater leaks into the sea every day.

From the outset, TEPCO's response has been dictated by concerns over its profits. Nonetheless, the company has been left in charge of the site by the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and its predecessor. It is estimated that it will take decades to decommission the plant and clean up the contaminated area.

Anger continues to grow among workers at the plant. On March 14, 100 workers rallied outside TEPCO headquarters against their low pay and dangerous working conditions.

One participant told Agence France Presse (AFP): "Workers at the Fukushima plant have been forced to do unreasonable tasks with no decent safety measures." He was laid off from the plant after several months due to radiation exposure. "Workers are forced to handle

contaminated water in such grim working conditions, where any human being should not be put to work,” he said. “They tend to make easy mistakes under the pressure, but it’s not they who are at fault—it’s the conditions that force them to do terrible tasks.”

The protestors also rallied outside the office of Maeda Corp, one of the contractors hired by TEPCO. According to AFP: “Some demonstrators said they received far less pay than promised as various layers of bosses docked money for supplying meals, transportation and other expenses. They also said many had not received a 10,000 yen (\$98) daily premium for decontamination work.”

A 51-year-old worker told the newsagency: “Most people are working for small pay without getting the special compensation.”

An article in the *New York Times* in March entitled “Unskilled and destitute are hiring targets for Fukushima cleanup provided further details of the exploitation of workers. It cited the case of a crew of contract workers who were sent to remove hoses and valves as part of a long-overdue upgrade to the plant’s water purification system.

“According to regulatory filings by TEPCO, the team received only a 20-minute briefing from their supervisor and were given no diagrams of the system they were to fix and no review of safety procedures—a scenario a former supervisor at the plant called unthinkable. Worse yet, the labourers were not warned that a hose near the one they would be removing was filled with water laced with radioactive cesium,” the article explained. The workers chose the wrong hose, and were sprayed with radioactive water.

The most oppressed layers of the working class, including the homeless, are recruited through a multi-tiered system of contractors, subcontractors and labour brokers to do the most dangerous jobs. The Yakuza, or Japanese mafia, is reportedly profiteering through its involvement in recruitment.

Shunichi Tanaka, the secretary general of the Nuclear Regulation Authority, declared at a press conference in February: “There is a subcontracting structure that means even workers from third- or fourth-level contractors work at the site, and TEPCO does not have a clear picture of what’s happening on the ground.” In fact, the whole system is designed by TEPCO to avoid legal responsibility for the pay, training and safety of

workers.

A Reuters article in December reported that many workers are paid below the minimum wage, after skimming by multiple tiers of contractors. The homeless, in particular, are subject to gross exploitation after being lured by the promises of labour brokers. In one case, a 55-year-old homeless man was paid \$US10 for a month of work. His paystub included deductions for food, accommodation and laundry amounting to \$1,500.

The government and the regulatory agencies turn a blind eye to a system designed to dragoon untrained workers into carrying out dangerous work for low pay. Economy Minister Toshimitsu Motegi told Reuters last October: “To get work done, it’s necessary to cooperate with a large number of companies.” The news agency reported that 70 percent of firms provided with decontamination contracts did not follow labour regulations. Japanese nuclear companies such as TEPCO have a long and documented history of cover-ups and collusion with nuclear regulators.



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