Japan: Two workers killed at TEPCO nuclear plants in Fukushima

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A worker at Japan's destroyed Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant died on Tuesday, after the latest in a rising number of accidents at the plant. A second worker was crushed to death on the same day at the neighboring Fukushima Daini plant, also operated by the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO).

These tragic deaths are yet another reminder of the ongoing dangers at the tsunami-affected Daiichi complex, and the disregard that TEPCO and Japan's entire ruling elite has for the health and safety of workers and the population as a whole.

The worker at the Daiichi plant, an unnamed 55-year-old man, fell 10 meters into an empty water storage tank that he was inspecting on Monday, and died in hospital the following day. Like many of those employed at the plant, he was hired through a subcontractor, Hazama Ando Corporation.

Akira Ono, the Daiichi plant manager, said TEPCO was "deeply sorry" for the death, and promised "to implement measures to ensure that such tragedy does not occur again." Such pledges are meaningless. Only last week, government labor inspectors warned TEPCO to address safety issues.

The Daiichi plant was crippled on March 11, 2011 by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and a resulting 15-foot tsunami. Partial meltdowns in three of its six reactors unleashed large amounts of radiation. Water that was used to cool the reactors after the original cooling systems were damaged also leaked. The contaminated water seeped into the ground or flowed into the Pacific Ocean, leading to still not fully-known environmental disaster.

About 7,000 workers are currently working to decommission the Daiichi plant. Since the 2011 meltdowns, workers have accused TEPCO of a wide range of abuses, including skimming money from workers' paychecks and working with the Yakuza—Japan's organized crime network—to force homeless men to perform some of the most dangerous work at low wages.

Accidents at the plant have doubled this fiscal year to 55. The last previous fatality occurred last March when a worker was buried by gravel while digging a ditch. "It's not just the number of accidents that has been on the rise. It's the serious cases, including deaths and serious injuries that have risen," labor inspector Katsuyoshi Ito reported. Heatstroke is also a serious concern for workers, especially in the summer months.

The second worker, a 48-year-old man, was crushed to death by falling equipment at the Daini plant, located 15 kilometres south of the Daiichi facility. Although the Daini plant escaped relatively unharmed from the earthquake and tsunami, it has served as a base for the Daiichi decommissioning process.

So far, no workers have officially died from radiation exposure in the post-quake Fukushima operations, but Masao Yoshida passed away in 2013 from esophageal cancer. Yoshida was credited with attempting to get the Daiichi plant under control in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. More than 10,000 workers are also acknowledged as being in danger of contracting leukemia, and are therefore potentially eligible for workers compensation.

According to a UN report published in April 2014, workers are also experiencing serious mental health problems as a result of the risks they have faced. "Effects such as depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms have already been reported," it stated, "related to the enormous impact of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear accident, and the fear and stigma related to the perceived risk of exposure to ionizing radiation."

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Professor Niwako Yamawaki of Brigham Young University, who studied the disaster's mental health impact on people from Hirono, a town in Fukushima Prefecture, commented: "When I think about that [that no-one has died from radiation-related illness], I kind of laugh. Nobody has died from the radiation, but it may actually have killed their souls."

Decommissioning the Daiichi plant could take as long as 40 years. TEPCO is not planning to remove the nuclear material from the three ruined reactors until approximately 2020. As a result, many dangers remain, compounded by the company's haphazard cleanup operations.

The buildup and storage of the hazardous water used to cool the reactors remains a serious problem. Currently, the water is stored in large tanks, like the one into which the worker fell on Monday. Workers have to deal with a growing number of new tanks.

Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) last Wednesday called on TEPCO to begin discharging supposedly low-level contaminated water into the ocean as a means of dealing with the problem. NRA chairman Shunichi Tanaka told a board meeting: "Tokyo Electric Power must consider whether it [storing the water] is really necessary. It is surely harmful if it leads to the death of workers." The board reportedly discussed a draft timetable for discharging the water in 2017.

The stored water contains tritium, an isotope of hydrogen regarded as one of the least harmful radioactive materials at a nuclear power plant. However, no detailed studies have been conducted on tritium's effects on animal genes, raising concerns over the NRA's plan.

TEPCO has a long history of serious safety breaches, systemic cover-ups of potentially fatal disasters and persecuting whistleblowers. Throughout the disaster, TEPCO, successive Japanese governments and the regulatory authorities have continued to make the protection of corporate profits the greatest priority, and reacted to each safety issue without a serious plan or regard for workers' health.

Opposition to nuclear power remains widespread in Japan. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government is pushing ahead with plans to restart the country's nuclear plants, despite the public opposition. Last November, Kagoshima prefecture's assembly voted to allow Kyushu Electric Power Co. to reopen two reactors at the Sendai nuclear plant this year.

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