

Tokyo plans to dump contaminated water from Fukushima reactors into the ocean

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Japan announced on April 13 that it intends to dump 1.25 million tonnes of radioactive water from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant into the Pacific Ocean, beginning in approximately two years. Workers in fishing, aquaculture, and other related industries have denounced the decision along with governments in the region, including South Korea and China.

Tokyo claimed that the water would only be dumped after it had been treated to remove harmful radioactive isotopes. Arguing that there was no alternative to the dumping, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga stated on April 13, “Releasing the treated water is an unavoidable task to decommission the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and reconstruct the Fukushima area.”

A massive earthquake on March 11, 2011 created a huge tsunami that devastated coastal towns and caused partial meltdown in three reactors at the Fukushima nuclear plant. To cool them, water was pumped through the reactors, a process that continues to this day, with the water then collected and stored in large steel tanks outside the facility. It is estimated that it will take another three decades to complete the decommissioning of the plant.

Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which owns the plant, claims that it will filter out all dangerous isotopes from the water except tritium, which is difficult to remove. It will then dilute the water to levels considered harmless. The government claims that this process replicates what takes place at nuclear plants around the world. It has supposedly set a limit of 50 becquerels of radioactive activity per kilogram (Bq/kg) in food coming from Fukushima in order to prove its safety, far below the 1,200 Bq/kg standard in the United States. However, tritium, when

ingested, can still raise the risk of cancer.

Furthermore, there is little reason to believe TEPCO. The company claimed for years that it had been filtering dangerous isotopes out of the water and only admitted in 2018 that it had been lying. TEPCO has a long history of violating safety regulations and ignoring warnings in pursuit of profit, including creating the conditions that led to the tsunami crippling the plant in the first place.

For all the claims of having learned lessons from the 2011 disaster, TEPCO continues to cut corners. It admitted in February to knowing that two seismometers installed in the Number 3 reactor, one of the three that melted down, had malfunctioned last year and not been repaired. The Nuclear Regulation Authority only instructed the company to install the measuring devices in March 2020. The issue came to light after the devices failed to record an earthquake in February.

Ayumi Fukakusa, a member of the Japanese branch of Friends of the Earth, drew attention to the lack of trust with the company and the government. Speaking to the US-based National Public Radio, she stated, “This process of decision-making is quite undemocratic. The government and TEPCO said that without consent from the fishing communities, they won’t discharge the contaminated water. That promise was completely broken.”

Residents and citizens’ groups held a protest in front of the Fukushima Prefectural Government building on April 13, shortly after Tokyo’s decision was announced. Tomoko Sato, who attended the demonstration, told the *Mainichi Shimbun*, “Before deciding on releasing radioactive wastewater into the sea, I’d like the national government to think about the issue as they address prefectural residents head on. I want them to think ahead to what will become of our

children's future.”

Fishermen in the area are rightly worried about the impact and that they will be unable to sell their catches. TEPCO claims it will compensate those who suffer losses, but fishermen have rejected this as insufficient. “The government may allocate budgets on measures against reputational damage, but such damage will not disappear easily. All that we have done to resume fishing was for nothing,” a fisherman from Namie, near the plant, told the *Japan Times* .

Many coastal cities in the region rely heavily on fishing, not only in Japan. In the east coast city of Pohang, South Korea, for example, approximately 5,000 people work directly in the fishing industry while an additional 30,000 work in related fields, including markets and restaurants.

On April 19, South Korean fishermen staged a demonstration at sea off the southern coast near Yeosu involving about 150 vessels. A separate demonstration the same day of 50 vessels took place off the coast of Geoje Island. “If Japan releases radioactive water, there is no guarantee that we will not eat radioactive fish. I can hardly control my anger,” a fisherman from Geoje said.

Seoul is considering legal action against Japan at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and has requested relevant information from Tokyo, but has so far been rebuffed. Japan’s Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso dismissed concerns, declaring, “Even drinking the [contaminated] water wouldn’t be a big deal.”

China’s foreign ministry released a statement on Tokyo’s decision, saying, “This action is extremely irresponsible, and will seriously damage international public health and safety, and the vital interests of people in neighbouring countries.”

He Farui, of the China Fisheries Association (CFA), stated: “There are up to 130,000 fishermen in Shandong and perhaps 1 million nationwide. If the nuclear wastewater is dumped into the sea, the impact will go beyond food safety to the health of these people.”

While workers and fishermen in Japan and throughout the region worry about the impact on their jobs and health, the various governments protesting Tokyo’s decision are far more concerned about protecting big business interests in the fishing industry. At the same time, they are utilizing anti-Japanese

sentiment to sow divisions between Japanese, Korean, and Chinese workers.

Workers throughout the region face the same issues which can only be addressed through a united struggle against big business and the governments that serve it. Workers should demand oversight over the clean-up of the Fukushima plant in accordance with scientific advice and not allow the capitalist class, which caused the disaster in the first place, to remain in control.



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