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Environment

The worst is unleashed in Fukushima!

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The gravity of the situation is worsening by the hour at the site of the nuclear power station at Fukushima, in Japan. The managers of the installations are apparently no longer in control of the sequence of events. The risk is growing of a disaster as serious, indeed more serious, as that of Chernobyl.

The complex at Fukushima Daichi has six boiling water nuclear reactors designed by General Electric. The power of these reactors varies from 439 MW (reactor 1) to 1067 MW (reactor 6). The fuel for reactor 3 is MOX (a mixture of depleted uranium oxide and plutonium), the others function with uranium. The dates of entry into service stretch from March 1971 to October 1979. So they are old machines, generally more than twenty years old, and are increasingly showing signs of wear and tear leading to incidents. In addition to the reactors, the site comprises silos for storage of solid waste. The operator of the station, the Tepco group, is known for not providing complete and reliable information on the latter.

Reactors 5 and 6 were shut down before the earthquake. The risks seem limited here, but a slight increase in temperature was noted on Tuesday March 15. However, various serious accidents have affected the four other reactors: four hydrogen explosions, a fire, and three partial core meltdowns.

The problems began in reactor Number 1 on Tuesday March 16. It seems that the reactor core melted down by 70%, and that of reactor Number 2 by 33%, according to the operator of the power station (New York Times, March 15). The information on the core meltdown of reactor Number 3 is contradictory but, according to the Japanese government, the reactor vessel of this installation was damaged (Kyodo News, March 15).

According to the French ASN, "there is no doubt that there has been the beginning of a core meltdown on reactors 1 and 3, and it is undoubtedly also the case on reactor Number 2" (Le Monde March 16). The reactor vessel of reactor 2 would not appear to be sealed either (Le Monde, March 15). According to the IAEA, a hydrogen explosion was followed by a violent fire in reactor 4. Here also the reactor vessel was damaged, but this reactor was shut down during the tsunami, so the risk of radioactive leakage was less.

An accident also affected the waste fuel storage ponds. In these installations, as in the power station reactor vessels, the fuel rods need to be constantly cooled by a current of water. As there is no longer enough water, the temperature of the rods has risen to the point of bringing the remaining liquid to boiling point, and the excess pressure has opened a beach in the containment system (BBC News, March 15).

The situation is out of control

The heroic power station workers are currently sacrificing their lives (like the "liquidators" of Chernobyl before them), but they no longer control the situation. They have tried to cool the reactors by using sea water. This was a desperate operation whose possible consequences are unknown (since sea water contains a whole series of components liable to enter into reaction with those of the installations).

Failure. The temperature is such that in some installations (the pools notably) the workers can no longer get close. The attempt to pour water on the reactors by helicopter had to be abandoned as the radioactivity was too high. According to the Japanese safety agency, the dose rate (measure of radioactivity) at the entry to the site is 10

millisievert per hour (10 mSv/h), ten times the level acceptable in a year.

The Chernobyl disaster seems to be replicated before our eyes. The result could even be worse than in the Ukraine twenty five years ago. Indeed, in case of total meltdown of reactor number 3, the reactor vessel would probably break and the fuel in meltdown would spread in the containment system which would not hold. In the nightmare scenario, it would be no longer isotopes of iodine, caesium or even uranium which would be released into the environment, but rather Plutonium 239, which is the most dangerous of all radioactive elements. We would then enter an apocalyptic scenario of death in all the zones affected by radiation, the extent of these being according to the force and altitude with which the particles would be ejected into the environment.

A mass mobilisation to end nuclear power!

Let us hope that we will be spared, the balance sheet is already horrible enough without this. But we are very conscious of the fact that this could happen and we draw the conclusion that it is necessary to put an end to nuclear power, totally and as quickly as possible. Not only civil nuclear power but also military nuclear power (the two sectors are inextricably linked). Mobilise en masse for this, everywhere, around the entire world. Get onto the streets, occupy symbolic places, and sign petitions. Nuclear power is the technology of the sorcerer's apprentice. We should demonstrate our categorical rejection by all means possible, individually and collectively. We should create a wave of indignation and horror so that the powers that be will be obliged to bend to our will.

No credit should be granted to the governments. At worst, they claim that the cause of the Fukushima disaster – the most violent tsunami for around a millennium – is “exceptional”, thus unique, that earthquakes of this magnitude do not threaten other regions of the world and so on. This is the refrain of the French and British partisans of the atom, relayed by their political friends. As if other exceptional and thus unique causes (an air crash, a terrorist attack and so on) could not lead to other disasters in other regions!

At best, governments announce a verification of safety standards, or a freeze on investment, or a moratorium on decisions of extension of existing power stations, indeed even the closure of the most dilapidated installations. This is the line adopted most spectacularly by Angela Merkel, who has made a 180° turn on the question. The risk is great that in most cases this line seeks above all to quieten people down, without radically renouncing nuclear power.

Because capitalism cannot simply renounce nuclear energy in the short term. A system which is congenitally productivist cannot abandon the growth of material production, thus of increasing inroads on natural resources. The relative progress of efficiency in the use of these resources is real, but more than compensated by the absolute increase in production. Given the other threat which weighs –that of climate change, given the physical and political tensions (the revolutions in the Arab-Muslim world!) which weigh on the supply of fossil fuels, the question of energy is truly the squaring of the circle for this bulimic system.

Dare for the impossible, dare for another society!

Definitively, the only realistic solution is to dare for the impossible: to advance the perspective of a society which does not produce for profit but for the satisfaction of real human needs (not alienated by the commodity), democratically determined, in the prudent respect of natural limits and the functioning of ecosystems. A society where, basic needs being satisfied, human happiness will be measured against a yardstick of that which forms the

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substance of it: free time. Time to love, play, enjoy, dream, collaborate, create, learn.

The road to this indispensable alternative does not rely only on individuals carrying out in ecologically responsible behaviour (indispensable though such behaviour is), but on the collective and political struggle for ambitious but perfectly realisable demands, such as:

â€” the radical and collective reduction of working time, without loss of wages, with compensatory hiring and drastic reduction of speed of work. It is necessary to work less and produce less;

â€” the suppression of the incredible mass of useless or harmful production, aimed at artificially swelling markets (obsolescence of products), or to compensate for the human misery of our existence, or to repress those who revolt against the latter (the manufacture of arms). With reconversion of workers employed in these sectors;

â€” the nationalisation without compensation of the energy and finance sectors. Energy is a common good of humanity. Its collective reappropriation, breaking with the imperatives of profit, is the indispensable condition for an energy transition which is just, rational and rapid towards renewable sources. This transition will also demand considerable resources, which justifies amply the confiscation of the assets of the bankers, insurers and other capitalist parasites;

â€” the radical extension of the public sector (free quality public transport, public undertaking of housing insulation and so on) and an equally radical withdrawal from the commodity and from money: free basic goods like water, energy, bread, up to a level corresponding to a reasonable consumption.

Capitalism is a system of death. Fukushima should increase our desire for an eco-socialist society, the society of producers freely associated in the prudent and respectful management of our beautiful planet Earth. There is only one of them.