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Nuclear disaster

Japan's unnecessary and predictable nuclear crisis

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Where the first two catastrophes were natural and unpredictable, a nuclear meltdown is entirely unnatural and entirely predictable.

Whereas the 2010 Gulf Oil spill showed the inherent dangers of the oil economy, the current nuclear crisis in Japan shows that nuclear power is not a solution. As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, it's time to shift away from both oil and nuclear and towards good green jobs for all.

Triple catastrophe – but one was avoidable

Japan has been hit by the worst crisis since 1945, as an earthquake and tsunami have killed at least 10,000, destroyed tens of thousands of buildings, displaced hundreds of thousands, and left millions without power or water. As the nation braces for more aftershocks, people have resorted to using sea water in an attempt to prevent a nuclear meltdown, with radiation having already leaked, leading to a mass evacuation.

According to Greenpeace :

“We are told by the nuclear industry that things like this cannot happen with modern reactors, yet Japan is in the middle of a nuclear crisis with potentially devastating consequences... The evolving situation at Fukushima remains far from clear, but what we do know is that contamination from the release of Cesium-137 poses a significant health risk to anyone exposed. Cesium-137 has been one of the isotopes causing the greatest health impacts following the Chernobyl disaster, because it can remain in the environment and food chain for 300 years.”

Where the first two catastrophes were natural and unpredictable, a nuclear meltdown is entirely unnatural and entirely predictable. According to the local anti-nuclear group, Citizens' Nuclear Information Centre :

“A nuclear disaster which the promoters of nuclear power in Japan said wouldn't happen is in progress. It is occurring as a result of an earthquake that they said would not happen...and we warned that Japan's nuclear power plants could be subjected to much stronger earthquakes and much bigger tsunamis than they were designed to withstand.”

Health meltdown

The nuclear crisis comes a month before the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, the largest nuclear meltdown in history, which showered Europe in a radioactive cloud causing a quarter of a million cancers, 100,000 of them fatal. As of this writing, the disaster in Japan is already the third worst in history, behind Chernobyl and the Three Mile Island partial meltdown in 1979, and comes only 12 years after a fatal overexposure of workers at a nuclear plant in Tokaimura, Japan.

Even without the inherent risk of a meltdown, nuclear power is a threat to health. As climate campaigner George Monbiot wrote more than a decade ago :

“The children of women who have worked in nuclear installations, according to a study by the National Radiological Protection Board, are eleven times more likely to contract cancer than the children of workers in non-radioactive industries. You can tell how close to [the nuclear plant in] Sellafield children live by the amount of plutonium in their teeth.”

Add to this the morbidity and mortality of working in uranium mines and the dangers of disposing of radioactive waste, and you have negative health impacts at every stage of nuclear power [1]. Despite this, governments have invested massively in the nuclear industry and globalized the risk. Canada has exported nuclear reactors while building seven of its own, and despite concerns about safety the Ontario government plans on investing \$36 billion into nuclear power at the same time as it is backing off wind power.

Reasons and excuses

While nuclear power is a clear and present danger to the health of the planet and its people, it is a thriving industry driven by economic and military competition. Dr. Vandana Shiva — who studied as a nuclear physicist and now leads the climate justice movement in India — has exposed the hypocrisy of U.S. hostility to Iranian nuclear power when it is doing the same thing to promote nuclear power and weapons in India as a bulwark against China :

“The nuclear deal with India, in fact, shows the double standards of U.S. nuclear policy, because for the same things that Iran does — Iran is “axis of evil” — but India here, through this nuclear agreement, is being told, we will separate civilian use and military use. Military use will be India’s sovereign decision. I don’t think it will be India’s sovereign decision, because I think in this deal is a strategic use of India for Asia, for a containment for China. But in addition to that, there is turning India into a nuclear market : a sale of nuclear technologies, of nuclear fuel... Not only will it spread nuclear risks and hazards in India, it will also allow corporations, like General Electric and others who pollute with carbon dioxide, as well as them, get quotas through emissions trading and markets for nuclear technology.”

As Shiva summarized in her book *Soil Not Oil* :

“nuclear winter is not an alternative to global warming”, and it is a tragedy that Japan has become the test case against both military and civilian arms of the nuclear industry — from the atomic bomb 65 years ago to the nuclear meltdown today. But instead of admitting the problems of nuclear power, the nuclear industry and its supporters have greenwashed it and presented it as a solution to global warming. Some environmentalists, such as Gaia theorist James Lovelock, have fallen prey to these claims. Lovelock, whose ideas are driven by apocalyptic predictions and an extreme pessimism, has gone so far as to claim that “nuclear power is the only green solution.”

While former U.S. president George Bush defended his country’s 103 nuclear power plants as not producing “a single pound of air pollution or greenhouse gases,” Dr. Helen Caldicott has refuted the claim in her important book *Nuclear Power is Not the Answer*, which proves that even without meltdowns nuclear power is a threat to the planet :

“Nuclear power is not ‘clean and green,’ as the industry claims, because large amounts of traditional fossil fuels are required to mine and refine the uranium needed to run nuclear power reactors, to construct the massive concrete reactor buildings, and to transport and store the toxic radioactive waste created by the nuclear process. Burning of this fossil fuel emits significant quantities of carbon dioxide (CO₂) — the primary “greenhouse gas” — into the atmosphere.

“In addition, large amounts of the now-banned chlorofluorocarbon gas (CFC) are emitted during the enrichment of uranium. CFC gas is not only 10,000 to 20,000 times more efficient as an atmospheric heat trapper (‘greenhouse gas’) than CO₂, but it is a classic ‘pollutant’ and a potent destroyer of the ozone layer. While currently the creation of nuclear electricity produces only one-third the amount of CO₂ emitted from a similar-sized, conventional gas generator, this is a transitory statistic. Over several decades, as the concentration of available uranium ore declines, more fossil fuels will be required to extract the ore from less concentrated ore veins. Within 10 to 20 years, nuclear reactors will produce no net energy because of the massive amounts of fossil fuel that will be necessary to mine and to enrich the remaining poor grades of uranium.”

The false dichotomy between carbon emissions and nuclear power is also refuted by those developing the tar sands, who have proposed using nuclear power to pump tar sands oil.

People power, green jobs

Fortunately there are growing anti-nuclear campaigns uniting indigenous groups, NGOs and the broader climate justice movement to challenge nuclear power in all its stages – from mining to use to waste disposal. As Dr. Shiva writes in *Soil Not Oil* :

“In 2005, the Navajo banned mining on their reservations, which covers 27,000 square miles across part of Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. In Australia, where the world’s largest deposits of uranium are located, movements have forced companies to restrict mining to 10 per cent of the reserves and the Australian government has recognized the aboriginal owners’ right to veto mining on their land.”

Meanwhile in Canada, indigenous groups are leading opposition to transportation of nuclear waste through the Great Lakes and their surrounding communities, declaring “what we do to the land, we do to ourselves.” Last year the German government extended nuclear power against the will of the majority but after news of the leak in Japan, 50,000 people formed a human chain from a nuclear reactor to Stuttgart demanding an end to nuclear power.

Uniting these campaigns with the labour movement raises the demands of good green jobs for all, to transform our oil and nuclear economy into one based on ecological and social sustainability and justice. Instead of the billions in subsidies for the nuclear industry, governments could be investing in solar, wind and clean electricity, while retrofitting buildings, which could solve the economic and climate crises without the inherent dangers of nuclear power.

As Greenpeace wrote :

“Our thoughts continue to be with the Japanese people as they face the threat of a nuclear disaster, following already devastating earthquake and tsunami. The authorities must focus on keeping people safe, and avoiding any further releases of radioactivity... Greenpeace is calling for the phase out of existing reactors, and no construction of new commercial nuclear reactors. Governments should invest in renewable energy resources that are not only environmentally sound but also affordable and reliable.”