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Nuclear power

Fukushima After Five Years

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Time will heal, some people say. The prospect of that looks bleak, however, for the people affected by the world's worst nuclear disaster.

In the five years since the triple meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, at least 100,000 people remain displaced; 80 people have committed suicide in Fukushima alone over the loss of their families, assets and hope for the future (as of December 2015, according to the Reconstruction Ministry and the Cabinet Office); radiation contamination continues to spread; and people still gather from across and outside Japan to chant anti-nuclear slogans at the Prime Minister's Residence in Tokyo every Friday.

The Japanese government seems to have forgotten about the major nuclear cleanup that is still ongoing and in need of 3000 workers every day at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) plant about 100 kilometers from Tokyo.

The government has also reactivated a dormant plant in the southern province of Kagoshima and plans to resume operation of another one in Fukui Prefecture in the north.

With a change of government leadership only six months after the disaster, Japan started marketing nuclear technology to Jordan, Vietnam, Turkey and South Africa among other countries, all of which were met with strong domestic protests. India, however, is to become the first country next year to sign a nuclear deal with Japan since the disaster. Japan ratified the UN non-proliferation treaty in 1976.

Protest Within

People joined their counterparts in speaking against Japan's nuclear export deals, seeking zero nuclear power and a shift to renewables since the day of the disaster.

They have staged protests at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), which oversees the nuclear industry. Mothers spoke up at these protests for the first time in their lives; younger people launched a hunger strike to call for the eradication of nuclear plants.

They sat in at METI, and the tent was erected in September 2011, immediately becoming the center of Japan's and the world's anti-nuclear movement. People have slept in the tent, gone to work from the tent, staged year-end anti-nuclear concerts in front of it and defended themselves against rightwing thugs who intended to destroy it.

Less known than Occupy Wall Street, the METI tent has become one of the world's longest occupations, along with the one against U.S. bases in Okinawa.

Now the tent and the occupiers are in a lawsuit against the ministry, which is claiming ownership of the land and demanding compensation for the last five years. The people have lost in the lower court, and the higher court dismissed their appeal. The tent is now subjected to eviction.

Listen to Workers' Voices

While we should push our movement forward to eradicate nuclear power, some plant workers feel their voices are not heard.

"I don't see any plant workers in the movement," Ryusuke Umeda said. The 80-year-old former plant worker calls on anti-nuke protesters to learn about the unsafe, radioactive working conditions at nuclear plants.

"I want people to question whether health and safety education is properly offered to the workers and in what kind of environment they are forced to work," Umeda said. "Knowing that will make you feel even more determined to wipe out all nuclear plants from the earth. For that, I will spend the rest of my short life convincing people how badly we need that."

Umeda has filed a lawsuit demanding workers' compensation. He claims he has contracted myocardial infarction and other ailments from working at nuclear plants for 43 days in 1979. As many plant workers end up suffering serious health deterioration, they are often deprived of further employment and faced with heavy medical costs. Umeda, too, is living off government subsidies.

Umeda's case is the first lawsuit filed by a plant worker demanding workers' compensation for his heart disorder. The same condition has been recognized by the state for A-bomb victims.

Hiroshi Masumoto is another one who ended up selling his house to compensate for his medical bills and living on government subsidies. The 82-year-old native of Kitakyushu City in southern Japan must rely on an oxygen tank to breathe. Masumoto, who managed the level of radiation exposure for his workers at several nuclear plants, is also engaged in a lawsuit to qualify for workers' compensation.

More than 6000 workers go in and out of the Daiichi plant in Fukushima every day, according to TEPCO. Some 300 additional people continue to decontaminate the no-go zones and fill black flexible container bags with radioactive soil to prepare for the victims' return home. Thousands of these black bags are piled up with no place to be taken.

The general contractors, their subsidiaries and TEPCO are running out of workers fast. A recent newspaper report said foreigners have been recruited for the cleanup in and around the Fukushima plant.

I have also interviewed a Bangladeshi man in central Kanagawa Prefecture who took a job offered by a Brazilian recruiter to work at the plant. He jumped on the truck with several other foreigners, he said. The pay was about 30% better than the construction work he had then.

The 43-year-old man left the job, however, in a few days because he "got scared" of the effect of radiation on his health. He may take it again, though, if he needs the money, he said.

A Survivor's Account

I remember meeting Tomoya Watanabe on March 16, 2011, at a school gymnasium-turned emergency shelter in Nihonmatsu, Fukushima Prefecture. I went up to the snowy countryside to get plant workers' testimonies after the disaster.

No TEPCO worker was willing to talk to us as they were afraid of reprimand. Watanabe was one of the very few outsourced workers who agreed to tell us about his experience when the quake struck.

At the shelter, he was helping the kitchen to serve hundreds of Namie residents like himself who evacuated from their town only ten kilometers from the Daiichi plant.

Watanabe started supervising workers at the Daiichi plant after he ended his assignment at Fukushima Daini plant, moved on to Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear plant and worked there until it underwent a regular inspection.

He recounted the day of the disaster to me. As a supervisor, he was finally able to leave the site only after he sent other workers to safety and confirmed the scale of damage inside the building next to the reactor. Realizing he was lucky to be alive, he swore never to return to that sort of work.

Half a year later, when I went up to interview him and other workers in Fukushima again, Watanabe told me he was starting a small company. I was pleased and inspired to find out that he was not discouraged by the disaster. But when I heard his company recruits and assigns people to work at nuclear plants, I could not hide the shock.

“That’s life,” he told me at the temporary housing he lived in with his family. “I need work.” Watanabe is not the only one who finds working in nuclear power plants to be his lifelong vocation. Many men who live in the host towns of nuclear plants recognize the mutual dependency.

Last year, he found me on Facebook and told me about his company that specializes in decontamination near the Fukushima plant. At least his business is successful.

Ever since thousands began to return for work at the Daiichi plant, the labor ministry has so far approved only one case of workers’ compensation. That happened only last year; the man in his 40s was diagnosed with leukemia from working at the Fukushima plant for a year and half.

Need to Unionize

While the Fukushima disaster is still ongoing and thousands of workers are required for the cleanup, we need to demand appropriate health and safety measures, as well as raising awareness about the rights of the workers, especially casual workers.

Labor activists along with a union in Fukushima and a day laborers’ union in Tokyo have been trying to organize casual workers. Unfortunately, their effort has not seen a big success, but some decontamination workers organized to negotiate for their unpaid risk allowance.

We need to continue organizing while also working together with our comrades outside of Japan for a nuclear-free society. In March this year, we are scheduled to hold a five-day “World Social Forum 2016” in Tokyo to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Fukushima disaster under the slogan, “toward another world without nukes.”

The scar may be too deep to heal with time, but remembering Fukushima is what’s important for our future.

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