

Japan: “Goodbye, nuclear power!” Labor lends its weight to mounting protests

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On Sept. 19, 2011, 60,000 people gathered in Tokyo’s Meiji Park to say “Goodbye, Nuclear Power Plants.” This demonstration was the biggest in Japan since the 1960s protests against the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement, a military pact strongly tying Japan to U.S. Cold War policies.

Among those marching through the bustling metropolis were mothers from the Fukushima district, unionists from within and outside the large labor federations, members of all opposition parties, environmentalists, students, anti-war activists, and religious protesters. Busloads of people came down from Fukushima, and there were even homeless workers from Osaka, who were recruited as day laborers to clean up the nuclear mess.

Police delayed the march for several hours, keeping the many thousands of people crammed together in a tight space with limited access to water and bathrooms, hoping people would give up and go home. But the demonstrators would not be deterred.

A disaster still unfolding

Months have passed since the great Eastern Japan Earthquake and explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear energy plant. Why are the people so angry?

Today, the situation in Fukushima prefecture remains critical. The reactors are still exposed and TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Co.) continues to pour water directly on the rods, which evaporates and releases radioactivity into the air. As yet there are no closed-circuit cooling systems installed.

Radiation has contaminated the water, air and food supply. Children, who are especially vulnerable to radiation, are eating contaminated produce in Fukushima schools. What has the government done? Raised what it considers the acceptable levels of radiation for kids!

Radiation reached harmful levels for 45 percent of children in the 20 kilometers (12 miles) of the evacuation zone. Nearly 10 percent are already showing signs of thyroid irregularities that increase their risk of cancer. Unions and parents in Fukushima and elsewhere are angrily speaking out against school principals and boards of education.

People are outraged because government officials assured atomic safety and lied. They accepted outdated plants and covered up safety violations, withheld information about the meltdown for many days, mishandled the evacuation, and totally ignored and continue to ignore people’s safety and welfare. People are now realizing that the situation was and is far worse than the government will admit.

According to Naoto Kan, then prime minister, TEPCO wanted to simply abandon the plant in the middle of the meltdown, and had to be ordered not to. Meanwhile, the government drew up worst-case evacuation plans for the entire Tokyo area, some 30 million people. Kan admitted that in such a scenario, Japan would cease to function as a state.

Before resigning, Kan pushed through a bill promoting increased development of renewable energies. But current Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda has announced his intent to prop up the nuclear industry and restart Japan's reactors.

Today 34 percent of families from the disaster area are living apart due to the evacuations. There are no accurate statistics on the evacuees, because many of them left in a hurry without registering with the municipal office. Conservative estimates cite over 55,000 people now living in other prefectures, and over 100,000 living in other parts of Fukushima, never to return to their original homes.

The temporary evacuation centers created after the earthquake were mostly emptied in June. As winter approaches, many people, including the elderly, now live in trailer homes without gas and heat — a solution that is both painfully inadequate and still temporary.

Rage against the nuclear machine.

The Sept. 19 demonstration was the largest to date in a series of actions against atomic energy rocking Japan.

On March 20, only nine days after the tsunami, Doro-Chiba and other militant unions held their annual anti-war, anti-nuke rally and march through Tokyo's Shibuya district. At a March 31 march past TEPCO headquarters, police arrested several activists with Zengakuren, the radical All-Japan Federation of Student Self-Government Associations, and thugs paid by TEPCO harassed the column. On June 11, 10,000 people turned out for multiple demonstrations in Tokyo, while other demonstrations took place simultaneously elsewhere, including a large rally in Osaka in Western Japan endorsed by many unions. On Sept. 11, the six-month anniversary of the quake, almost 10,000 political and labor activists marched against nuclear power, and police arrested several.

There is no estimating the total number of rallies, strikes, and marches that have taken place all across Japan since March 11, including a recent strike by rail workers who refuse to run trains in radioactive areas and a drive to collect 10 million signatures demanding an end to nuclear power, to be presented to the government next year.

Unions step forward.

Instrumental in organizing the Sept. 19 mass demonstration was the endorsement and support of labor unions, including the large federations Zenroren and Zenrokyo, who threw their weight into the anti-nuke struggle. Japan is a country with falling wages, labor law loopholes, precarious employment, slashed benefits, delayed pensions, sweeping privatization, and increasing regressive taxation. The corporate greed and government incompetence that resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands, and the measures taken since the disaster to balance the budget on the backs of the workers and cling to nuclear power and the export thereof, have energized the rank and file of many unions and forced labor leaders to take a political position on the issue of nuclear power.

Even many Rengo unionists attended the demonstrations. This is significant because Rengo, Japan's largest labor federation and the one whose unions represent nuclear industry workers, is pro-government and previously held a pro-nuclear position. In early October, Rengo announced it was abandoning its pro-nuclear line.

The "Goodbye, Nuclear Power Plants" rally is a fine example of what labor can achieve when the focus is on mobilizing workers for mass action, rather than draining rank-and-file energy in collaboration with the ruling party and employers. And it marks a big step forward in broadening and deepening the anti-nuclear movement — a movement Japan needs as never before.

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