

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2202>



Japan

# A first turning point in the crisis

- IV Online magazine - 2011 - IV438 - July 2011 -

Publication date: Wednesday 6 July 2011

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**Every day brings new revelations on the gravity of the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daichi and on the mendacious policies which covered the activity of the nucleocrat lobby, on the breadth of the risks imposed on the population by the choice of the atom, on the denial of democracy. The shock wave of scandal spreads across the Japanese archipelago. It could be said that the Japanese crisis has reached a turning point.**

Initially, only small minorities mobilised against the social and energy policies of the government. Subject to incessant calls for national unity, the population was initially traumatised by the brutality and the violence of the triple disaster: earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis. Then the feeling of having been fooled by the sorcerers' apprentices spread, lighting the fires of popular anger. Faced with rising opposition, rather than apologising, the employers showed a clear will to let nothing go. Lines of confrontation are taking shape; the political issues of the months to come are emerging.

## Fukushima: today's lies

Tepco, the operator of Fukushima 1, and the Japanese authorities have had to recognise that from the beginning of the crisis, the core of three of the six reactors of the power station had melted; that – contrary to previous affirmations – the earthquake damaged the buildings and that the tsunami was not alone responsible; that in drowning the fissile material to cool it, they had created a new major problem: a mass of radioactive water which spread on the site and made it impossible to work there; that they were totally unprepared for such an accident. Industry and administration have also not been capable of coordinating their action effectively faced with the disaster.

Note that the lack of preparation was not only Japanese. The international nuclear authorities never envisaged the Fukushima scenario: the simultaneous accident of four reactors with the conjuncture of an earthquake and a tsunami. A myth collapses, according to which “everything is planned for”, “everything will remain under control”. A truth is imposed: the scientific body (the physicists), the experts and the media have been complicit in a criminal lie. Indeed, most particularly in Japan, a country condemned to suffer violent earthquakes, the support of the population for the nuclear industry depends on confidence in “expertise”. It is this confidence which is being shattered.

## Nuclear power: yesterday's lies

A sign of the times – although with delay and much timidity – the Japanese press is beginning to offer more critical information on the ongoing nuclear crisis [\[1\]](#). Progressively the veil is being lifted also on the history of nuclear lies in the archipelago. A Pandora's Box is opening.

The deployment of the nuclear industry is above all imposed on peoples on the basis of a dishonest promise: access to unlimited energy, cheap, risk-free, the basis of a continuous economic development and social progress. However, to make it accepted in Japan, it has been necessary to surmount two obstacles: the trauma of Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the concern aroused by the seismic instability of the archipelago.

To promote the nuclear industry in the 1950s, and conceal their culpability in the mega war crime of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki, the United States opposed “atoms for peace” to “atoms for war” – blurring the organic link between the two, with civil nuclear energy producing what the military need to produce the Bomb. As occupying power they obtained the active collaboration of the Japanese government to pass on the message, with a certain success: the figureheads of the movement against atomic weapons in Japan became fervent defenders of civil nuclear energy.

Another big lie, the affirmation that all was anticipated, all would remain under control, whereas the nuclear risk was created for hundreds, thousands of years and still more. It is enough to glance at past history to know that the history to come will bring natural disasters, industrial accidents, governmental crises, economic collapse, wars, revolutions and counter revolutions. However few journalists and scientists have derided this claim to keep fission (which cannot be cut off like electricity) and the emission of radioactivity (that cannot be destroyed) eternally under control. Dissident voices were rendered inaudible thanks to the backing contributed to the nucleocrat enterprise by the body of physicists and experts, relayed by the opinion formers, who have played a truly criminal role. Cracks appear today in the academic front, whereas the people doubts the experts. Beyond its specificities the history of nuclear lies in Japan greatly resembles what has happened in other countries, France most particularly.

## The end of received ideas

A more surprising aspect of the consequences of the disaster of March 11 is that the lack of preparation of the Japanese authorities does not concern only the nuclear aspect of the crisis, as shown by a report prepared by the UNO which the Japan Times [\[2\]](#) has published.

The combination of the earthquake, its repeated aftershocks, the tsunami and the nuclear emergency, notes the report, provoked a simultaneous “multisectoral” collapse of infrastructures – a type of collapse generally associated with less developed countries: incapacity to rapidly supply water, food and shelter to those affected or to re-establish the functioning of communications and services. Although Japan’s level of preparation for earthquakes certainly saved numerous lives, the authorities have not wished to invest in protection from events deemed to be improbable.

One figure illustrates the breadth of the problem: in the mid May note of Yomiuri Shimbun [\[3\]](#) in average only 30% of the aid passing through official channels reached the victims, so great was the disorganisation.

## Employers in battle order

The Japanese crisis makes no exception to the rule: in time of humanitarian disaster class domination strengthens more than it is blurred in the name of solidarity. The bosses have made it known that they would not challenge the choice of nuclear energy, that they considered that Tepco and the nuclear industry were neither guilty nor responsible, that the indemnification of the victims should be financed by taxes or increased electricity prices – pushing to its end that very capitalist logic according to which profits are privatised and losses socialised.

The Japanese economy has entered into recession and for the first time since 1980, in April the trade balance was in deficit. The employers argue the crisis justifies a cut in social aid, increased taxes borne by the population, and the reduction of protection against layoffs. The bosses are leading a head on offensive on the nuclear question and on social rights. The *résistance* should also link the two questions.

## The rise of resistance

In the nuclear area, there has been a loss of confidence in the “experts” among the public, while the people have been particularly shocked by the cynicism of the government, which has increased the legal rates of radiation; and this not only for the personnel working in the Fukushima 1 power station, but also for the school students of the region. “Can the government guarantee the health of our children?” ask the parents [4].

As in France, the nuclear industry in Japan uses the weapon of financial blackmail, to silence opposition, manipulating taxes and subsidies in the localities where the power stations are established. The government has nonetheless had to agree to temporarily close the reactors at Hamaoka, an installation particularly poorly prepared for a tsunami. Other scandals have come to light, like that of the breeder reactor at Monju, in the bay of Tsuruga. It is situated on a very active seismic fault and had been closed in 1995 following a serious sodium leak. Reopened in May 2010, it experienced a new accident three months later when a part of the cover fell in the pit of the reactor. Since, no solution has been found and one of the site managers has killed himself, leaving a testament whose content is kept secret.

Today, the anti nuclear movement has taken off. After sometimes significant demonstrations (17,500 in Tokyo in two places), a call was made to pass from local action to national and international action, with June 11 a world day of mobilisations [5].

This passage from local to national resistance remains to be carried through on the social terrain. Initiatives are being taken in defence of workers in the nuclear industry, subject to radioactive risk. Village dwellers express dissidence. Refugees denounce their conditions. Radical trades unionists fight in defence of social rights. But there is not for the moment, a call to makes these struggles converge.

Radical activists, however, are making the link between the social and anti-nuclear struggles [6]. Innovative initiatives like the sit-in before Tepco headquarters have been initiated by trades unionists

## The political stakes

Activists from political, associative and trade union backgrounds took part in the anti nuclear mobilisations. But the latter are largely dominated by youth without prior commitments, using the social networks as a mode of keeping in touch. They also now involve parents concerned for the future of their children. The entry into action of milieus without political traditions gives strength and vitality to the emergent movement of resistance. Without a precedent for forty years in the Archipelago, it shows that we are witnessing a turning point in the political situation of the country.

The Japanese crisis is not “sectoral”; it does not concern “only” nuclear energy or “only” social issues. It is a crisis of confidence, a democratic crisis, a legitimacy crisis for the government, a national crisis. It will not be easy for the elites to overcome it. But it is also a crisis without a ready constituted alternative and it will not be easy for the rank and file to give form to a real political alternative.

For the first time, certainly, plans for ending nuclear power are being drawn up. But in the event that the administration would be forced to withdraw on this terrain (for now it has renounced plans to increase the share of nuclear power in electricity production from 30 to 50%), the industry would propose its own alternatives, productivist, chosen for the profit that they can generate and not for their social and ecological rationality. It is not enough to close existing power stations. It is necessary also to change the energy paradigm – which cannot be done without attacking

its dominant economic logic (capitalist) and the established powers.

It should be hoped that the disaster at Fukushima does not get worse; but even in the most optimistic hypothesis, the affected power stations will continue for a very long time to emit radioactivity. As to the social conflict, it is only beginning and will accompany the whole period of post-tsunami reconstruction. It is to solidarity in the long term that we must look.

# The internationalisation of the stakes

The shock wave from Fukushima has been felt well beyond the Japanese archipelago. It has stimulated other mobilisations as in Jaitapur in India against the construction of a giant nuclear power station. It strengthens public rejection of nuclear power where this was already strong as in Germany, and reduces public support where it was predominant, as in France.

The political context has changed following Fukushima. Also from the point of view of industry, the economic profitability of investment in nuclear power is challenged, given the price of the new safety demands that the Japanese disaster, after that of Chernobyl, will impose. It is symptomatic that the German company Siemens has just decided to withdraw from this sector, and the Swiss authorities have announced an end to nuclear power, while other governments hesitate. For its part, the French government maintains an unbridled defence of the nuclear options

Unfortunately at an excessively high price, the disaster of March 11 has opened a breach in the wall of nucleocracy. The Japanese people must simultaneously face the consequences of the earthquake, the tsunami and the Fukushima disaster. At this difficult time they need our solidarity.

ESSF collects funds for the Japanese social movements, in particular the north eastern region of the National Trade Union Council (NTUC). Please send donations via Europe solidaire sans frontières (ESSF):

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[1] There is a reflection of this in the numerous articles from the Japanese press in English that we put on line at ESSF. None of the big Japanese media outlets are anti-nuclear. "Asahi" or "Asahi Shinbun" is a centrist national daily which produces an English language weekly and puts some articles in English online and "Mainichi Shinbun" has a similar position. The "Japan Times", a little more left wing, is a daily published in English only. "Yomiuri Shinbun", very much more right wing, is strongly pro-nuclear. This group also produces a newspaper in English, the "Daily Yomiuri". "Nikkei" or "Nihon Keizai Shinbun" ("Japan Economic Newspaper") is the Japanese equivalent of the "Financial Times" in Britain or the "Wall Street Journal" in the USA. The group produces a weekly in English and an online service

[2] Japan Times, May 27, 2011. On ESSF (article 21728): "Japan/Tohoku: U.N. cites 'synchronous' infrastructure failure"

[3] "Yomiuri Shinbun", May 24, 2011. On ESSF (article 21679): "Japan/Tohoku: Only 30% of donations reaches victims"

[4] see articles from the Japanese press on ESSF (article 21704)

[5] See on ESSF (article 21553): "A Call From Japan – Action June 11: No Nuclear Power"

[6] [See for example, "Japan: Let's defend our lives and employment through the unity and solidarity among workers!" ESSF (article 21609