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Japan/Nuclear Power

Fukushima and capitalist inhumanity

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Writing after the Japanese nuclear disaster, Dr Abraham Behar, President of the Association of French Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (AMFPGN), asked: "Voices are raised to discuss the fate of the 50 technicians who are doing what they can in the highly radioactive plant. But who cares about the some 300 others working alongside the fire-fighters and their derisory water jets? [1].

"Working conditions are awful" said Thierry Charles, Director of the Institute of Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN), quoted in an article by Catherine Vincent [3]. Then, it was still difficult for journalists to verify the extent to which that judgment was justified. The fate of the employees of subcontracting companies remained in particular "unfamiliar" noted Philippe Pons, a correspondent for "Le Monde" who has lived for several decades in the archipelago. The sociologist Paul Jobin, a specialist on this question, knew enough to warn: "Without reinforcements, the Fukushima workers are doomed" [4].

Are the doses of radioactivity received by these workers as dangerous as Jobin claims? Many "experts" say no, relying on the (notoriously incomplete) official data and legally authorized "levels" of exposures to radiation - forgetting that these levels are defined taking account of the needs of the industries concerned rather than medical criteria: as evidence, they change according to the emergency and the country, as if the effects of radiation varied depending on the place and time!

Thus on March 19, the Japanese authorities identified the legal maximum as up to 250 millisieverts in order to continue to send employees into Fukushima and reduce population evacuations. Paul Jobin notes that "in normal times in Japan, the legal maximum exposure is 20 millisieverts (mSv) per year averaged over five years, or a maximum of 100 over two years, which is already very high, but one can translate this "emergency" decision as a way to legalize their coming death and avoid having to pay their families, because cancer risks increase in proportion to the steep dose. With doses of 250 mSv, the risks of cancers, mutagenic violations or reproductive risks are very high." [5]

Beyond the somewhat abstract figures, all this should convince anyone who still doubts that the health of human beings is not the first concern of industrialists and governments! All the employees of Tepco - the company responsible for the site- as well as the fire-fighters and soldiers involved in the plant are at significant risk; but it is the employees of subcontracting companies who do the most dangerous work (notably wading in pools of highly radioactive water, pulling cables to restore electricity, removing debris from the sites, spraying the reactors deprived of cooling systems and attempting to restart the operation of the equipment).

There is a history of trimming costs and, despite the harshness of their tasks, "workers at risk" are poorly fed. "We eat twice a day. For breakfast, energy biscuits, a dinner of instant rice and canned food" explains Kazuma Yokota, a supervisor at the plant, to a Japanese television crew. There is no midday meal. In the early days of the crisis, each worker received only a litre and a half of bottled water. They sleep (briefly) in precarious conditions on the site of Fukushima in a building purpose built for resisting radiation, on a mat and with a sheet of lead, supposed to protect: "employees sleep in groups in the meeting rooms, corridors or near bathrooms. Everyone sleeps on the floor". [6]

The "gypsies of nuclear power" as they are called in Japan (they move from plant to plant, as needed) live 24 hours a day in a contaminated environment. The protection equipment failed badly. They often only had one dosimeter for two people - indeed, according to Tepco, after the disaster of March 11, there were only 320 dosimeters functioning of the 5,000 officially in-store! They wear rubber or plastic boots. "Working conditions are increasingly dangerous, I

don't think you would find other employees who would accept this, a subcontractor said to the newspaper "Asahi". [7]
]

The anti-nuclear movement - and not only the trade unions - must defend these employees in danger. As noted by Abraham Behar, "only the workers have a double risk, high doses associated with accidents and low doses like any exposed and contaminated population [...] What solidarity can we, should we, put in place for the obscure Japanese precarious workers? The trade union movement has been able to mobilize for temporary workers in nuclear power and the European Union has taken some draft provisions, and we, what do we do?"

The seriousness of the danger to the Fukushima workers is in no doubt. The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has acknowledged this in its own way : "It is never good to have any kind of work that requires putting one's life on the line," a high-ranking official of the Ministry said. "However, the importance of settling the situation at the nuclear plant goes beyond the range of labor policy. I cannot be confident about whether that or the safety of the workers should have priority." Even if expressed in a somewhat circumvented language, it could not be clearer. [8]

Paul Jobin notes that the employees of subcontractors "often work below the standards of protection. The boss of a small company residing near Fukushima 1, who had worked on behalf of manufacturers of nuclear reactors (General Electric, Hitachi and so on) showed me in 2002 the "no anomaly" stamp that he had used for years to falsify the health records of workers for whom he was responsible, until he was himself suffering from cancer and dismissed by Tepco." [9]

The scandal having erupted publicly, workers at the crisis-hit plant got better conditions of protection and compensation - in the hope that the employees of subcontractors will also benefit from the new measures. But all this says a lot about the state of unpreparedness of the nuclear industry and the government for a major accident. Tepco had to confess that it had, even with respect to its own employees, not defined a level of payment corresponding to the present crisis, having "never contemplated a situation in which workers would operate continuously at a high level of radiation." [10]

All this also reveals the daily inhumanity of capitalism for which the health and life of workers - or neighbouring populations, victims of the pollution - is an adjustable variable, like wages. Thus, in the name of the interests of the shareholders, Tepco had refused to implement legally required safety measures and had negotiated lower insurance contracts. Tomorrow it will declare itself bankrupt if necessary, leaving the state to take up the burden of compensation. However, Tepco is not a marginal representative of the business world. Founded in 1951, this Japanese multinational has become the largest private producer of electricity in the world. Thus, the company's policy casts a floodlight on the background of the set, on the nature of actually existing capitalism.

[1] "l'Humanité" March 21, 2011

[2] "l'Humanité" March 21, 2011

[3] "Le Monde", March 19, 2011

[4] "Le Monde", March 24, 2011

[5] op cit.

[6] AFP, March 29, 2011, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article21122>

[7] AFP, op cit

[8] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article20992>

[9] op cit

[10] "Asahi", op cit