

Heroes or scapegoats? Nuclear plant workers before and after Fukushima

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Interview with Paul Jobin, a French sociologist, Director of the CEFC Taipei (French Research Center on Contemporary China, Taipei Office) and an Associate Professor at the University of Paris Diderot where he teaches the sociology of contemporary Japan. In 2002, Paul has conducted a survey with workers at Fukushima nuclear plants. After this year disaster, he had the opportunity to meet with a contract worker who is still working there.

Japan is one of the most advanced countries globally, economically and in terms of technology. Since 1973, the country embarked on the use of nuclear energy to solve its excessive energy dependence. Before before the earthquake and nuclear reactor meltdown in March 2011, about 30% of the country's electricity needs were provided by Japan's 54 main nuclear reactors, and this was expected to increase to at least 40% by 2017. Much of this information was reported after Japan's disastrous earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, which not only created hundreds of thousands of refugees but also damaged nuclear reactors, especially Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station.

This disaster is both natural and human. By now, many aspects of the post-nuclear disaster have been pinpointed as due to known and preventable human risks being taken. The tragedy

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continues at the individual level as well as social. Parts of the immediate area of the nuclear plant and earthquake are highly radioactive, and estimated to be uninhabitable for at least one hundred years. Recently, some hot spots have been detected as far as Tokyo. It looks as if a huge area of North-east Japan became a sort of “controlled zone”, the appellation for the zones exposed to radiations in a nuclear plant. At Fukushima Daiichi, workers are still required to clean the garbages of the disaster so as to reduce the harm to the rest of the country and the world. It is a Faustian bargain, yet the bargain is made by the corporation, while workers work in danger out of compulsion of their economic necessity. Those lacking work are ‘willing’ to face the deadly work environment of nuclear rubble to earn for their families.

From January to September 2002, Paul Jobin had conducted interviews with contract workers of Fukushima Daiichi to compare their situation with the case of France. In June and July 2011, Paul went back to Fukushima prefecture where he could meet with TS, a qualified worker who has been employed many years at a mid-level subcontractor specialized in nuclear plants, working in particular for TEPCO’ Fukushima plants. TS is one of the rare workers now at Fukushima who accept to speak to journalists and researchers. He does so because he believes this is the only way to put some pressure on TEPCO and the government. But TS asked not to reveal his identity for fear he would be fired. The following excerpt focuses on the inspection periods and the compromises on safety made by TEPCO before the 3.11 disaster, as well as the failure of the company to provide guidebooks on radiation management during the aftermath of the crisis.

PJ:	According to your experience, Fukushima was hit harder than the plant of
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TS: In Onagawa, the plant is in a bay, so I guess it was not hurt directly, while in Fukushima, the plant is

Of course nobody could talk about the possibility of a severe accident. Nobody even thought of the poss

PJ: In April, there were some recruitment advertisements for the nuclear power plant in Prefect

The salary was not even that high, at 10,000 yen per hour, with a maximum of three

TS: I guess they are part of those who are cleaning up the debris of the explosions. In three days, they c

PJ: What about the radioprotection for other workers?

TS: Before the disaster, we were required to have a copy of the radiation monitoring handbook. Without

Through this excerpt, we can see that workers and citizens are deprived of important information for their own safety. As in many industries in the world where the employer is not disciplined by the presence of an active union, the company makes choices in favor of 'efficiency' and cost reduction, over the safety of its workers. The situation is particularly serious for workers down the 'supply chain', i.e. subcontractors and outsourced workers.

While working in a nuclear power plant seems to be a unique job, not comparable to other industries, in fact there is a simple common denominator with all those who do dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs all around the world – insecurity or plain lack of work, and thus inability to subsist without wage work, forces workers to accept compromises to their health and safety as a precondition of their work. It is in fact a false 'choice' if the workers are beholden by the industry to keep their jobs.

A bargained right

On March 14, the Ministry of Health and Labour rose the annual exposure limits from 20 to 250mSv, following the recommendations of the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) in case of emergency, while in normal times, the maximum exposure limit is set at 100mSv over five years, or 20mSv per year. Activists from the Citizen's Nuclear Information Center (CNIC) and the Japan Occupational Safety and Health Resource Center (JOSHRC, a friend organization of AMRC) were outraged: is this a way to legalize death or limit foreseeable compensation claims? On 15 April 2011, the Ministry agreed to enter into negotiations. At the session in June, an official admitted that the decision came from TEPCO and NISA, the Japanese Nuclear Safety Authority under the Ministry of Economy (METI). So the labour activists made a strong request: if you need to send more people to Fukushima to limitate the levels of radiations exposure, then why don't you stop the nuclear plants all over Japan and send these workers there?

After further tough discussions from July to September, on October 14, the Minister of Health and Labour announced that the maximum exposure level will be brought back to 100 mSv a year, but only for those who will start to work after November, thus excluding all those who have already bypassed this limit.

The contract workers in Fukushima have not yet succeeded to build their organization to protect themselves. The RENGO and other big unions do not care for them, as these organisations are still devoted to the interests of the top managers. This is why CNIC, JOSHRC and other marginal labour organizations—what Paul Jobin names “labour NGOs”—are spending a lot of efforts to defend the basic rights of these workers. These are indeed very basic rights: rights for life and health protection. Workers and their organizations might seek protection of their health as a right. Yet from the government and industry point of view, the workers' health is something negotiable, something that can be bargained over, in order to reduce the cost that must be paid by the country.

In the immediate aftermath of the nuclear crisis, the government and TEPCO should have placed safety of the citizens and accurate information as highest priorities. Yet the world has seen that they have repeatedly misinformed the public about risks and basic facts like radiation levels. In spite of the public outcry, the authorities continue to shroud the nuclear clean-up and restoration work in secrecy. As ‘emergency’ measures the government has vastly raised the permissible mSv of radiation exposure. But for what reason did the government risked such a horrible disaster as a nuclear meltdown? And now, for whom does it hide and downplay the health risks and social costs of using nuclear energy, to the point of binding nuclear plant

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workers to extreme secrecy?

For the moment, it seems that the government and the nuclear industry in Japan continue to assume there is 'no choice' but to accept the dangers of nuclear reactors for the sake of its power needs, and thus they continually obfuscate the dangers of the industry, sacrifices of its workers and risks to citizens. But it can change. The vigilance of ordinary citizens and workers, their willingness to unite and speak, could hold companies and the government accountable.

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