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Okinawa's Fukushima Connection: Nuclear Workers at Risk 沖縄の福島とのつながり――原発作業員no

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Of Japan's prefectures, Okinawa lies farthest from Fukushima Daiichi. At over 1000 miles from the plant, even Seoul is closer. Okinawa also has no nuclear plant and seems to be distanced from the consequences of Japan's nuclear policies, but is this really the case?

Since the 1970s, Japanese academics and social commentators have highlighted the government and energy industry's targeting of peripheral and impoverished areas for nuclear development. Large subsidies to impoverished communities undermined resistance to nuclear power plants, fierce in the 1970s, as local populations fragmented between groups that considered atomic energy an existential threat and those that saw it the only hope to bring the type of prosperity promised by Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei's *Nihon retto kaizoron* (On Remodeling the Japanese Archipelago). In this vision, infrastructure development, ranging from big dams to hydropower and nuclear power plants, was posited as the best way for the declining hinterland to share in the high growth prosperity of Japan's major cities and the Pacific industrial belt. Tanaka made these arguments just as the "oil shock" was shaking Japanese energy policy, heralding the shift to nuclear power as an answer to dependence on Middle East oil.

It was not just peripheral areas that were targeted, however, but also peripheral groups. Coal mining regions, where livelihoods collapsed from the 1960s as the nation shifted to primary reliance on oil, were a fertile ground for recruiting nuclear workers. Also, as outlined in books like *Genbatsu ha sabetsu de ugoku* (Nuclear is Powered by Discrimination), *burakumin* – Japanese who faced discrimination because the jobs of their ancestors were held to be "unclean" professions such as tanning and graveyard work – were also targeted by recruiters at a time when discrimination in mainstream society made even dangerous unskilled work in the nuclear industry attractive.

What then of Okinawa? Okinawa is Japan's poorest prefecture. Okinawan children score the lowest on nation-wide standardized tests. The area has Japan's highest unemployment along with one of the lowest minimum wage levels and one of the highest rates of welfare dependency (statistics here and here). Discriminatory attitudes among some mainlanders hold these figures to be a result of "prefectural characteristics" such as poor work ethic and alcoholism. Kevin Maher, a top Japan-hand at the US State Department, echoed crude but unfortunately common patterns of denigration of Okinawans when he accused the people of the prefecture of being "lazy" and "masters of manipulation and extortion".

A lack of development investment by the Japanese government and private capital, however, together with legacies of the 1945-1972 period in which the most fertile land was seized for US bases and Okinawa was run as a US military colony, with most work servicing the military and entertainment (sex) industries, better explain Okinawa's problems than stereotypes presented as the essential character of the people.

Okinawa's tenuous economy leads many young men to move to the mainland as unskilled migrant labourers. Just as *burakumin* and residents of economically devastated coal mining regions have been targeted by recruiters for the high risk unskilled jobs that are the most common form of atomic labour, so too have Okinawans.

On May 11, the Asahi TV network's Okinawa branch ran an expose about Okinawans in the atomic energy industry. This issue had first grabbed local attention in 2005 when an Okinawan worker in his 50s died from radiation exposure.

Higuchi Kenji, one of Japan's leading anti-nuclear crusaders since the 1970s, whose photo essays have focused on the exposure of workers to radiation, comments that while workers were given devices to measure external radiation, the industry has never seriously addressed the issue of internal exposure of labourers.

Higuchi quotes the words of a mother whose 28 year-old son died from radiation related illness: "It's unbelievable. How can the inside of nuclear plants be so contaminated [with radiation]. They said that it was 'peaceful use'. They said it was safe." Higuchi reports that documents are altered and stopgap repairs made to cover up irresponsible practices leading to illness or death. It might be thought that safety provisions have increased since the 1970s, the early years of nuclear power in Japan, but Higuchi argues the opposite – because of ageing reactors and other equipment, the irradiation of Japan's legions of nuclear labourers may be getting worse.

The Asahi news segment outlines the attractions of nuclear labour – it is short term work for decent pay that allows workers to return home for a sojourn before going back on another contract. Workers also report, however, that compared to similar jobs nuclear energy has a "clean" reputation. Companies do little to educate workers, telling them instead that doing things by the book will protect them from radiation. As Higuchi notes, however, there is little in the book about internal exposure, accidents, and ageing equipment. There is

also the matter of corporate irresponsibility, as in the case of TEPCO's now notorious more than a decade long cover up of cracks in reactor shrouds, which only ended after a whistleblower came forward in 2002.

Other interviews with Okinawan nuclear workers show hints of fatalism on the part of workers: "The percentage of people who go back is very high. But if our kids say that they want to do that type of work, we're opposed. There's always a chance [that something bad will happen], isn't there?"

In that "something bad", Higuchi sees a state crime being passed off as a state policy. Despite the large number of cases of worker exposure to dangerous levels of radiation on a daily basis described by activists, as of 2005 only six had been officially acknowledged. Asahi interviews Sueko, a woman whose husband died after being exposed to high levels of radiation while working, ironically, as a safety inspector at nuclear plants. She had to fight for state acknowledgement and help with the over $100,000 dollars in medical bills made necessary by his terminal lymphoma diagnosis.

These tragic stories, Higuchi's comments, and the position of Okinawa, held to be the one part of Japan most isolated from atomic fears, remind us that while the situation in Fukushima is described as a "crisis" and a "tragedy", these words suggest an abnormal state. The lot of Japan's nuclear workers, 500,000 of whom are estimated by Higuchi to have been exposed to levels of radiation sufficient to have an impact on health, has long been a tragedy passed off as business as usual.

Sources

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