

Editorial

What's happening at Fukushima?

We do not yet know the full extent of the nuclear disaster still unfolding at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan. The situation changes daily, and only very limited information has been released. There are problems with all six reactors on the site, and the operators are plainly struggling to cope. A breach has been reported in at least one of the reactors. Already, there have been significant leaks of contamination, including traces of deadly plutonium. Nuclear wastewater is being pumped into the Pacific Ocean, contrary to international conventions of the sea.

As the reports from Japan, some of which we publish in this issue, make clear, life for many Japanese people has become very tough. It is especially so for those who live just outside the original evacuation zone, which extends 20 kilometres from the plant. People living within 20 to 30 kilometres of the plant were told to evacuate or stay indoors. Suppliers of food and water to those who remained in this area were reluctant to deliver for fear of contamination. This gave rise to an anguished appeal by the Mayor of Minamisoma in Fukushima Prefecture, Katsunobu Sakurai, broadcast on YouTube, a translation of which we reprint on page 7. Now, it seems this 10 kilometre wide 'doughnut' of territory might also be evacuated. There remains enormous uncertainty about exposure to contamination. This, of course, causes residents considerable anxiety.

In response to the tragedy which has beset its country, Gensuikyo, the Japanese Council Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, is trying to help the hundreds of thousands of people who are suffering or have been evacuated. Gensuikyo has established accounts, including one with PayPal, to receive donations towards the cost of this work (see English Page at www.antiatom.org).

Gensuikyo has also resolved to hold, as usual, the 2011 World Conference against A and H Bombs, which will take place from 3rd to 9th August in the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This year's Conference will address the ongoing disaster of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, which, as the organisers say, once again 'sheds light on the tremendous danger of the current development of nuclear energy which sacrifices people's safety in the endless pursuit of profit'. Of course, secretiveness of this industry over decades increases the risks.

Gensuikyo exhorts the Japanese Government to take urgent measures to avert catastrophic exposure of the entire nation to radiation. It should conduct comprehensive checks on all existing nuclear reactors, and stop

the use of plutonium fuel in nuclear power plants. Apparently, the Japanese Government is now reviewing its planned increase in the use of plutonium, a development which poses acute problems for the mixed oxide (MOX) reprocessing plant at Sellafield in Cumbria, built to supply this lethal trade. In 2010, the Japanese Government permitted resumption of operation of the fast breeder reactor, using MOX fuel, at the Monju nuclear power plant, where, in 1995, there was a major fire which led to the plant's long shut-down. Gensuikyo calls on the Japanese government to shift its energy policy from dependence on nuclear power to developing renewable energy and the creation of a low-energy society.

All this is happening 25 years after the explosion of the reactor at Chernobyl in Ukraine, in April 1986. The meltdown of its core was the 'ultimate nightmare of the nuclear industry', in the words of Zhores Medvedev in his pioneering study, *The Legacy of Chernobyl*, published in 1990. The plume of fallout spread across much of Europe, reaching the westernmost parts of Britain.

What of the situation in Britain? The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Chris Huhne, has asked the Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations, Dr Mike Weightman, to provide a report on the implications of the events in Japan and the lessons to be learned by the UK nuclear industry and its 19 reactors currently operating at ten sites, and any future ones. The Chief Inspector has understandably responded by saying that the limited information available from Japan at this time will necessarily limit the scope of the interim report requested for mid-May. A more comprehensive report, produced in collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency, will come later.

The Chief Inspector is at pains to emphasise that his reports will 'not address nuclear or energy policy issues'. It's unlikely, therefore, that they will answer any of the searching questions posed to the Coalition Government by Christopher Gifford in his recent publication, *Nuclear New Build?* (Spokesman, Socialist Renewal £6). In particular, Mr Gifford, a Chartered Mining Engineer who worked with nuclear installations inspectors while in the Health and Safety Executive, urges examination of the claim that 'modern reactors of proven safe design exist'. How can this be, when, as Mr Gifford points, 'the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate has reported that only incomplete and inadequate designs have been submitted in the last three years'.

What would residents of Fukushima Prefecture make of that?

Tony Simpson