

ATTENTION:

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An Appeal to Improve Labor Conditions for Workers at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant

Labor conditions for the workers employed to clean up after the accident at the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant operated by TEPCO have worsened considerably since the time of the accident; compensation has decreased, the housing situation has worsened, and more. This has been reported in at least three forums: first, on the radio program *Hôdô suru rajio* [Radio Broadcast News] broadcast on March 15, 2013, specifically in a segment called “Radio Broadcast News Brings You the True Story of the Two Years since the Nuclear Accident” (hereafter referred to as: *Radio Broadcast News*); second, a roundtable discussion published in the April 2013 issue of the journal *Sekai* that featured three workers at the nuclear plant, entitled “What is happening now at 1-F [an abbreviation for “Fukushima Dai-ichi”]?” (hereafter: *Roundtable*); and third, a report filed in the same issue of *Sekai* by Fuse Yûjin titled “1-F Has Not Yet Been Restored” (hereafter: *Report*). These sources have publicized the issue in some detail, so in what follows, I would like to draw from these sources what I consider to be the main points of concern and my opinions on how to address them.

What all three sources indicate as the common cause for the worsening of conditions for workers at 1-F is TEPCO’s letting outside corporations bid to provide services in order to cut costs. A company attempting to become a TEPCO contractor will submit a bid below the current rate, and this regularly results in eight or even nine layers of subcontractors, so it becomes clear why the conditions for the workers employed at the bottom of these chains of subcontracted labor get progressively worse. For example, the workers who had been performing a job at the time of the accident have seen their numbers cut in half while still expected to do the same job as before (*Radio Broadcast News*); moreover, workers who had been housed in hotels in Iwaki city and bused in and out of the disaster site were moved to prefab units or abandoned houses in a place nearer the disaster site called Hironomachi, and were expected to provide their own meals and their own hot water for bathing instead of having it provided for them, and even transportation to and from the disaster site became their responsibility (*Radio Broadcast News*). Hironomachi is located in an area that was designated an Emergency Evacuation Preparedness Zone until just the beginning of this year, and almost none of its former residents have returned; the radiation levels there are reportedly much higher than in Iwaki.

So just imagine for a moment: during the day you perform intense labor in a highly radioactive zone, and when you return to your cold house, no one is there to greet you, in fact there is almost no one anywhere around you at all; would you have the will to go out and buy ingredients to make yourself a proper meal? Would there be any day when trying to get as much sleep as possible wouldn’t take priority over preparing a balanced meal or taking a bath? To cut costs in these areas displays in extreme form a complete disregard for the health and wellbeing of workers.

In terms of wages as well, even workers with seniority dating from before the accident are finding themselves being paid about two thousand yen less per day, along with the elimination of extra compensation for hazardous work conditions; there is testimony as well that at the lowest end of the spectrum, it is not uncommon for the daily wage to dip to just eight thousand yen (*Report*). Even more shocking, according to Radio Broadcast News, in response to a recent survey taken by TEPCO of its subcontracted workers, 5% reported earning less than 837 yen per hour (Tokyo minimum wage)! This survey is one supposedly administered regularly by TEPCO to assess the situation of its subcontracted labor, but in fact, TEPCO does not administer it directly. Rather, the surveys are entrusted to the main contractor to distribute to its subcontractors, and so on. Some workers report that during the surveys they are pointedly reminded by their bosses not to “write anything unusual” (*Report*), while others report having to fill out the surveys in front of their bosses or even being told what to write as they fill them out (*Radio Broadcast News*). So it is hard to believe that the results of this survey reflect the true working conditions of these employees, yet even it shows that 9% of them work at least five layers of subcontractors below the main contractor; 15% are “false” contract workers, that is, the company from which they receive wages and the company for which they are said to be working are in fact different; and another 15% report not being told how much radiation they are exposed to during a day (*Radio Broadcast News*).

It is a clear violation of the Labor Standards Act to employ this sort of “false” contract labor or to expose workers to unknown levels of radiation. If this survey was done properly, imagine what sort of conditions might be exposed! When *Sekai* asked TEPCO about the marked decrease in worker compensation and elimination of hazard pay, TEPCO’s public relations department explained, “The costs entailed in the job, including consideration of working conditions, are stipulated in the contracts we make, but these employees are contracted to subcontractors, and thus we have no knowledge of how they are compensated; after all, we cannot pretend to speak to the workings of companies with whom we have no contract” (*Report*). Further, when asked about the various other problems reported on the survey, TEPCO said, “We request of our contractors, as the contracting company, that their subcontractors provide workers with adequate wages, support for their basic needs, and everything else guaranteed by the Constitution” (*Report*).

But this survey is not something that occurred for the first time just now. It has been administered regularly for some time. In the two years following the accident, these problems have not only been left unaddressed, they’ve gotten worse. These workers are exposing themselves to radiation cleaning up a disaster TEPCO created. Is TEPCO not obliged to protect these workers’ health and provide them with proper working conditions? And what about the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare? What are they doing about the clear violations of the Labor Standards Act that have emerged from this survey?

Another important issue is the increased replacement of experienced workers familiar with nuclear technology by workers with no nuclear experience when the experienced workers reach their maximum allowable level of radiation exposure. As one worker put it during the roundtable, “In a high radiation zone, you are exposed to radiation whether you are undergoing training or not; in other words, there is no time for training. Rather than simply getting rid of experienced workers when they reach their maximum exposure levels, we should guarantee their employment during the five years it takes to reset their levels by using them to educate new workers and man conventional thermal power plants in order to preserve these human resources. That way, these workers could

support operations until it was time they could return to the nuclear site.” I find it hard to contemplate returning workers who had reached their maximum radiation level back into a high radiation zone even after five years, but nevertheless, it would be good for such workers to be provided with proper medical examinations and the like during that time. In any case, the cleanup of Fukushima Dai-ichi is a job that will end in the far future, any number of decades down the line. Precisely because workers are irradiating themselves in order to complete this job for us, we must closely safeguard their wellbeing. Whether this clean-up process continues slowly and steadily or another major accident occurs is an affair that concerns not just Japan but every living being on the planet. So it is the duty of each and every one of us to guarantee a stable work environment for those who perform this job for us, so that they can work proudly, knowing that they are doing their part to stop our environment from becoming even more polluted than it already is. Let us all listen in good faith to the words of the workers, and be vigilant in our calls to make TEPCO and the Japanese government take proper responsibility toward them, to guarantee that each and every one of them will see their proper wages restored and their work environments improved; let us never let up in these demands until they are met.

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If you or your group would like to sign this letter, please send your name (as well as any relevant institutional or group affiliation) and location to Sumi Hasegawa at sumi.hasegawa@bell.net