

Faustian pact with nuclear power

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Many have praised the Japanese people's resilience and preparedness in response to the earthquake and tsunami which has killed thousands of people with many more unaccounted for.

But as a second explosion at the Fukushima nuclear plant releases another blast of radiation into the atmosphere, what began as a natural disaster is being made worse by what some see as human folly.

However, we are not talking about human madness in general so much as the interests of power-generating companies and governments in their thrall. Why build 53 nuclear power plants in a country which lies directly on earthquake fault-lines and which only 16 years ago experienced a major disaster in the city of Kobe?

The wisdom of building more and more plants, not only in earthquake-prone areas, but near urban centres is being questioned around the world, as peak oil drives capitalist governments to switch to nuclear power generation in an almost desperate effort to diversify energy sources.

Naturally there are those who would prefer to leave the nuclear industry alone to get on with tapping the public purse. In the United States for example, one politician claims that it would be "poor form for anyone to criticise the nuclear industry, or pronounce the end of nuclear power, because of a natural disaster that has been a national tragedy for the Japanese people".

Others, however, have pointed clearly to the danger of increasing reliance on nuclear power generation. A leading seismologist, Ishibashi Katsuhiko warned in 2007 about the likelihood of just such an accident. Katsuhiko, an expert in urban safety at Kobe University, has said that Japan's government, the power industry and the academic community had all underestimated the potential risks posed by major quakes.

He points out that over past decades the power of earthquakes has grown far greater than Japanese plants were designed to survive. In addition, deliberate falsification of data caused a scandal at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in 2002. Managers there at first refused to admit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA).

Politicians in virtually every country have been singing the praises of increased dependence on nuclear power stations, all of them constructed with huge government subsidies. Sixty reactors are in construction around the globe. According to the World Nuclear Association "another 150 or more planned to come on line during the next 10 years, and over 200 further back in the pipeline".

Ed Miliband, as energy secretary, in 2009 approved 10 more for Britain. None of them will be built without massive state support. Energy corporations are already suggesting a carbon tax that could cost the average household more than £200 extra per year. After initial doubts about the virtues of nuclear power, prime minister David Cameron is now a 'convert'.

The result of the expansion programme will be a huge increase in uranium mining, with new

operations already being opened up in Namibia and Kazakhstan.

Uranium mining exposes miners and their communities to high levels of carcinogenic radon gas. There is no safe way of disposing of waste, which also carries significant health risks.

The idea that nuclear is a contribution to reduced carbon emissions is rubbish. The result of extracting the uranium and the billions of tons of cement needed to build all these huge plants will be massive CO₂ emissions. It is unlikely any future savings in emissions would offset this early surge over the whole life of a reactor.

A study by the Rocky Mountain Institute, which campaigns for rational use of the world's resources, says that if every dollar spent on nuclear power were invested instead in energy efficiency measures, it would produce seven times greater reduction in carbon emissions. But the corporations are not going to get profits from energy efficiency – and people using less fuel means smaller profits for them.

In Japan, the trauma of losing entire towns to the tsunami and the rescue operation may for the time being put the nuclear issue into the background. But the political fall-out could be just beginning as confidence in those who blithely continue the Faustian pact with nuclear power plummets further.

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P.S.

* From A World to Win, 14 March 2011:

<http://www.aworldtowin.net/blog/faustian-pact-with-nuclear-power.html>