

Fewer workers willing to brave radiation risk at crippled Fukushima plant

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As critical repairs continue at the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, its operator is finding it difficult to find people willing to work at the plant.

The tally of workers at the plant as of May 3 was 1,312 people. Many of them are employed by subcontractors hired by operator Tokyo Electric Power Co.

Many current employees are anxious about the dangers of high radiation and what they say are the plant's poor labor conditions.

According to a company that supplies workers to the Fukushima plant, it has become increasingly difficult to send the necessary number of people.

Many workers who went to the plant immediately after the March 11 accident now refuse to return, citing bad labor conditions.

On March 24, three workers were accidentally exposed to high levels of radiation. Since then, many workers have been begged by their families not to work at the plant again.

TEPCO announced May 4 that it will take measures to improve the living environment for workers. The steps include not only better food and living amenities such as shower facilities, but also construction of temporary dormitories.

The utility is now considering measures other than using subcontractors' employees to find workers.

An executive of another company used by TEPCO said, "Immediately after March 11 accident, some workers refused to enter the compound, fearing high-level radiation, and went home. Since then, we have provided detailed explanations to any workers hired, and obtained their consent (to the exposure risks). But it is still difficult to find enough workers."

According to several workers at the nuclear power plant, many places inside the compound are filled with highly radioactive rubble that was scattered by hydrogen explosions. Work to remove the rubble to clear passageways is not making much progress, they said.

"Whenever we pass near the rubble, our portable dosimeters sound an alarm," one worker for a subcontractor said.

Another worker said, "Because the rubble of the collapsed reactor buildings is scattered all over, we can't avoid the radiation."

The daily stress of radiation exposure fears are causing many workers to experience symptoms of chronic illness, such as hyperventilation or abnormal heartbeats.

A different worker said angrily: "I asked my employer about the details of my employment contract,

including what compensation will be paid when I am exposed to high-level radiation. But I have not received a reply. Such an attitude is not one that should be taken toward people who are working so hard in such dangerous places.”

He said he talked about his complaint with co-workers at their temporary accommodation facility, which they share with the TEPCO workers. Some colleagues urged him not to talk about his dissatisfaction in the hearing of the TEPCO employees.

This story was compiled from reports by Yosuke Akai, Kentaro Uechi and Yuki Takayama.

P.S.

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<http://www.asahi.com/english/TKY201105050093.html>