

# Japan: politics and struggle after the tsunami

Monday 17 June 2013, by [McNEIL Dougal](#) (Date first published: 1 June 2013).

**Dougal McNeill looks at the changing political situation in Japan in the wake of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.**

## Contents

- [A tragedy that could have \(...\)](#)
- [Corporate neglect vs working](#)
- [The protest movement emerges](#)
- [Ruling class responses](#)
- [Portrait of a movement](#)
- [Ideological breakthroughs](#)
- [Slow train coming](#)

The 2011 earthquake and tsunami brought untold devastation and loss to people in Japan. [1] Close to 19,000 are dead or missing; 150,000 residents from the Fukushima area were forced to flee, and most have yet to return to their homes, while the environmental and social loss of the nuclear disaster is still only beginning to be calculated. The Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant was crippled following the earthquake, and radiation damage to its structure compounded an already desperate situation. The signs of what is to come are grim: a report notes that "Japan Tobacco Inc. says radioactive cesium levels in some dried tobacco leaves harvested this year in Fukushima Prefecture exceeded the company's limit", [2] above-limit radioactive cesium levels have been found in Miyagi beef, [3] while abnormalities in butterflies collected around Fukushima suggest radiation is causing mutations. [4] The stress and disruption of ongoing earthquakes through the first half of 2011, and the continuing uncertainty around food safety, radiation, and social displacement, reveal stark problems in Japanese society.

If the earthquake and tsunami were natural disasters, there was nothing natural about their social impact. The disorganised, chaotic and occasionally callous response of both the Japanese government and Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) has exposed their priorities and principles to public view. The disaster has generated a crisis for Japan's ruling class, and has stimulated a protest movement on a scale that has not been seen in Japan for many decades. The results of the nuclear disaster have been superimposed onto a society already under enormous strain after two decades of economic stagnation; the homelessness caused by the evacuation of Fukushima crashed into the problems of a chronic, and under-reported, housing crisis. So the movement against nuclear power has significance beyond its immediate aims. It has acted as a catalyst for discontent on a whole range of other social issues, and has the chance to develop a wider anti-capitalist energy. Huge problems confront the movement, of organisation, outlook, analysis and direction. But it represents a chance the workers' movement and the left in Japan have not seen since the 1960s. This is an under-reported struggle, and deserves to be better known.

This article outlines the political impact of the earthquake and disaster, describes the emerging protest movement, looks at some of the challenges confronting Japan's anti-nuclear movement, and considers some of its prospects. We have drawn on Japanese sources as much as possible to make

some of the voices of the protest movement audible, and to share the excitement of this campaign.

### **A tragedy that could have been avoided**

“It was a crime and the people in government who made that decision should go to jail.” That’s the view of farmer Ito Nobuyoshi, speaking to journalist David McNeill one year on from the disaster. He lives in the small village of Iitate, some 40 kilometres from the plant. There was terrible radiation damage on 14 and 15 March. “It rained on those nights and the rain brought the radiation down on top of us,” Ito told McNeill. For some reason “the government delayed releasing data that would have shown the radiation’s path and saved many from heavy exposure. Hundreds of families unknowingly evacuated into the most irradiated areas.” [5] Stories like this abound.

After having spent months claiming that nothing could have been done to save its plant from damage after the earthquake, TEPCO in October was forced to admit that it knew safety improvements were needed and had failed to act. The reason? The company’s directors were afraid that acknowledging safety concerns might have led to lawsuits. Fearing that people in areas hosting plants would be worried by revelations of safety breaches, the company chose to suppress its own evidence. In their words, “There was a worry that if the company were to implement a severe-accident response plan, it would spur anxiety throughout the country and in the communities near where nuclear plants are sited, and lend momentum to the anti-nuclear movement.” [6]

Investigative journalists and campaigners had been issuing warnings about safety concerns for years, only to be ignored by mainstream media sources content to keep in step with government and company lines. Researcher Onda Katsunobu published a book called TEPCO’s Dark Empire in 2007, listing the company’s history of safety breaches, cover-ups and corruption. It stayed in obscurity for four years. Plenty of other signs of the dangers the nuclear industry posed to ordinary people were there before the earthquake. In 1996 Fujita Yuuko’s book Silent Killer exposed the huge health costs workers for TEPCO faced, following the life of Shimahashi Nobuyuki who died of leukaemia at the age of 29 as a result of being exposed to radiation through work. [7] The bosses who now claim they could not have known what was to come are lying, and they know it. What is different now is that the public does too.

Here the phrase about capitalism privatising profits and socialising losses receives stark confirmation. Over one hundred thousand people have been made homeless, many of TEPCO’s workers have been exposed to life-threatening conditions, radiation will ruin the livelihood of thousands of small farmers, and whole ways of life have been uprooted and destroyed, all because the utility company put its own stability – and bottom line – ahead of public safety.

As each new revelation came out about TEPCO’s ineptitude and recklessness, public dissatisfaction rose. In a sign of how worried the Japanese government was at this public discontent, the National Diet (Parliament) ordered the first independent report in its history. The commission was no radical or popular body, but made up of establishment figures, scientists and officials the ruling class could have assumed would be “safe pairs of hands”. Its conclusions, released in July, are damning. The message from its chair, Kiyoshi Kurokawa, indicates how thoroughly the official world had been discredited:

The earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011 were natural disasters of a magnitude that shocked the entire world. Although triggered by these cataclysmic events, the subsequent accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant cannot be regarded as a natural disaster. It was a profoundly manmade disaster – that could and should have been foreseen and prevented. And its effects could have been mitigated by a more effective human response [...]

Our report catalogues a multitude of errors and wilful negligence that left the Fukushima plant unprepared for the events of March 11. And it examines serious deficiencies in the response to the accident by TEPCO, regulators and the government. [8]

The report goes on to try to spread the blame for this “wilful negligence” across “Japanese culture” more generally, but the facts speak for themselves: corporate culture, and the top-down, bullying atmosphere of big corporations are hardly unique to Japan.

### **Corporate neglect vs working class solidarity**

In the days and weeks immediately after the earthquake, basic survival was the order of the day, and it is out of the networks formed in this process that the first steps of the protest movement began. TEPCO itself quite happily added insult to injury: “from September 12<sup>th</sup>, half a year after the meltdown, the utility started sending, mostly through the post, a 58-page application form for compensation that demanded receipts (actual, not copied) for transportation and other fees incurred during the evacuation, bank or tax statements proving pre-disaster income levels and documented evidence of worsening health since the move. A month later, TEPCO had received just 7,600 completed forms – that is about 10% – because they were widely considered too arduous and detailed, but above all because many of the required documents requested were destroyed by the earthquake and tsunami.” [9] As climate activist Sakoto Kishimoto puts it, “Fukushima today is a totally dislocated community and neither the government nor TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company, which exploits the Fukushima power plant) will pick up the tab. They’ve abandoned the people of Fukushima to their fate.” [10]

The response of ordinary Japanese people stands in contrast to this insult. Unions and community groups began the task of organising shelter and care when it became apparent the government was unable, or unwilling, to do so. Although reconstruction will take many years – and some areas will be uninhabitable indefinitely – much government temporary accommodation requires families to leave after two years. In other areas there is no subsidy for basics such as water and gas in evacuation zones. Smaller, radical unions, especially those who organise among young casualised workers, have politicised relief work, providing services to their members and working class communities at the same time as they organise against the political logic of reconstruction. Iwahashi Makoto, an activist with the autonomist union POSSE, explained this strategy at a union gathering in Seoul last year:

The government’s official line amongst this is “Creative Reconstruction”, a code for neoliberal reconstruction, reshaping cities to the demands of business. The government has adopted policies such as deregulation to encourage global competition among multinational corporations, establishing “recovery zones” with tax incentives, and fast-tracking deregulation for private capital to flow into the devastated ports and farmlands. At the same time, the government has done nothing to guarantee the living standards of ordinary people. Some people have been excluded from social security, and families have had their benefits stopped once they are deemed “independent” after relocating to temporary housing.

Given this situation, we believe that it is important for activists to assist reconstruction in Sendai. There are people who have been abandoned and have received almost no state assistance. In helping these people, we hope to highlight the issue of poverty in Japan as a general social problem, rather than a transient one that has developed solely due to the earthquake. The earthquake has highlighted deep social problems, such as the inadequacies of social and residential security; these are not issues that have emerged for the first time. The problems in the affected areas reflect problems in Japan more generally, and our first aim is to raise poverty as a social issue. [11]

Iwahashi's argument that "the problems in the affected areas reflect problems in Japan more generally" is important; having endured two decades of declining living standards, rising unemployment and growing economic uncertainty, the Japanese working class felt this crisis all the more acutely. [12]

Workers in the construction industry face these problems in particular concentrated form. The Japanese construction industry has managed to stifle most union organising, and is dominated by organised crime, ruthless casualising employers and atomised work regimes. TEPCO exploits all of this. In June 2011 POSSE's blog reported that "The most dangerous clean-up work post Fukushima Daiichi meltdown has been left to day labourers. These workers are exposing themselves to high levels of radiation by carrying the contaminated water from the tank etc., and oftentimes don't even know what they're getting themselves in for because the Situations Vacant add outright lies about the work or will try to lure workers by offering permanent fulltime work when it actually is contract or casual employment. This reveals issues of poverty and the inequality gap inherent in society." [13]

### **The protest movement emerges**

It is unsurprising that, given the Japanese people's experience of the horrors of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, anti-nuclear sentiment has always been strong among workers. But decades of relative social stability, and – until the collapse of the "Bubble" economy in the 1990s – increasing standards of living for many workers helped the ruling class to separate the "bad" nuclear question (nuclear weapons and militarism, too hot politically for Japan's rulers to touch even as, from the 1950s onwards, they faced US pressure to rearm) from the "good" nuclear question (energy, "prosperity", power). What anti-nuclear movement Japan had before 2011 was small, dispersed, fractured and marginal.

Initially it looked as if nothing much would change following Fukushima. There were protests against nuclear power and the government's handling of the disaster from early in March, but these were very small, and were ignored by the Japanese media. Their size, though, concealed their significance. Campaigning journalist Chie Matsumoto observes:

This is not the only one demonstration we've had in Japan. When you look at the past demonstrations throughout the year since the disaster, it is very clear that people are starting to act on it. It used to be very rare for Japanese to take action: It used to be considered that protests and demonstrations were only for the limited few...[and were not] the right of the people.

But since the disaster, demonstrations have taken a different turn. They have been growing bigger every time. Many of different sizes have sprung out across the country.

The very recent one at the Diet building was probably one of the very few that people gathered on their own, rather than upon request for collective action by trade unions or civil society that they belong to. These were individuals who were truly angry, frustrated and betrayed by the Japanese government, and they acted out. [14]

These unprompted gatherings had a spontaneous air to them, with similarities to the Occupy movement: people heard about sit-ins and demonstrations from friends on social media sites and decided to start similar events in their own cities. A younger generation, untouched by the exhausting legacy of defeats and setbacks that have plagued Japan's existing left, built these rallies, many of them taking political action for the first time in their lives.

Social media played an important role in the beginning of this process, and then, as people's

confidence increased by seeing how many other people shared their views and were prepared to march, workplaces came alive with political discussion, often for the first time. "I found out about this rally through Twitter", one Kyoto woman told interviewers covering an anti-nuclear rally; "I can't talk about this with the people I work with or the people around me but compared to before I think I can have a conversation about why we don't need nuclear power and people seem to agree." [15]

With each week, new revelations of the disaster's damage or the shady practices of TEPCO would dominate Japan's major newspapers and, with them, each week through the northern spring and summer of 2011, the movement grew. What started as vigils of a few hundred people grew into weekly gatherings of several thousand. The movement "rose like a rocket", growing from nothing into a force that dominated Japanese politics for months on end. A sit-in and tent embassy outside the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry lasted six months from September 2011, and massed crowds of supporters regularly saw off police attempts to disperse the protest. "Women of Fukushima", a protest movement of displaced women from the affected region, intersected with the sit-in and became another pole of organising attraction. Demonstrations started, and continued, outside the Prime Minister's residence. The Friday protests grew from 300 in March to 90,000 in July. For a country known for its docile and apolitical public culture, suddenly Japan was politically alive. Evacuees from affected regions played important roles in these weekly mobilisations, and gave the movement confidence to resist calls for "national unity" and other attempts to depoliticise the situation. At one rally in October the Akahata [Red Flag], the Communist Party's daily newspaper, interviewed an evacuee from the nuclear meltdown: "I didn't know how dangerous nuclear power plants were before this," he said. "Many people don't know what a big mess a meltdown can cause. I took part in these rallies to share my experience with others. I find the demonstrations happening in front of the PM's office very encouraging; it makes me happy to know that people unaffected immediately by the disaster are also protesting for themselves." [16] Inspired by the lead Tokyo activists offered, smaller demonstrations in rural areas, and around Fukushima, have now become common.

Most inspiring of all are the mass protests. Some 60,000 mobilised in Tokyo to mark six months since the disaster. Over twenty thousand marched in late July 2012, enduring extreme humidity and mid-summer heat; at another July rally 200,000 surrounded the Diet building. Earlier in July 170,000 people marched in Tokyo. These are all amongst the biggest demonstrations Japan has seen since 1960. Police and organiser estimates vary wildly, as always; but, even going by the police's under-estimates, the crowds involved in protesting are on a scale qualitatively different from anything this generation has known.

Prime Minister Noda at one stage tried to dismiss the protest movement as "a lot of noise": "But these voices are not just noise", the Japan Times reports protester, student Hayashi Yuichi, retorting. [17] The ruling class has, for the moment, lost the initiative as it tries to respond to this popular movement. On the one hand, Noda and his cabinet are desperate to act as if the protest movement leaves them unaffected, and to assure business that normal life - with nuclear power plants reactivated - can continue. But at the same time the movement threatens to keep spreading, and the longer people stay on the streets the more confident and emboldened they feel. This marks a sharp break from the authoritarian, strictly repressive social order Japanese capitalism has maintained; if protest is legitimised by this movement, who knows where it will stop? As Matsumoto Hajime, one of the more radical protest organisers, told the New York Times, the country is "on the cusp of something new". [18]

This "something new" finds expression within the movement, and around its base. Inside the movement, Kunitomi Kenji, a veteran revolutionary socialist and editor of the *Kakehashi*, argues that a "primitive anti-capitalist consciousness" is emerging amongst demonstrators as they gain



experience protesting and are exposed to the inspiration of debate and discussion inside the movement. They are pulling society to the left as they go; a survey conducted by the Mainichi Shinbun showed 47 percent felt solidarity with the demonstrators and their aims. This registers a significant shift in a country where protest has long been demonised. [19] The very fact that people are protesting in large numbers again is giving them a sense of their own power: "It doesn't matter, for now, if people hear us or not," Ayuko Higashi told the New York Times, during her third anti-nuclear rally. "It's just a big step forward to start raising our voices." [20]

The bulk of material produced around the campaign so far, from political groups and activists' campaign groups, limits itself to the question of ending Japan's reliance on nuclear power. But it is clear that significant numbers are drawing connections between their own safety, the forces that benefit from nuclear power, and the limits of Japan's democracy. "It's become clear who is really pushing for the nuclear agenda", one man from Aichi told the Akahata at one of the Friday-night rallies in September. "We want to show the PM Noda that ordinary people's rage is more dangerous than Keidanren [Japan's leading business lobby group] or the US." [21] Another told the paper they were "shaking with rage", while another first-time protester expressed the views of many: "It feels like a turning point in history. We won't stop until all the nuclear power plants have been decommissioned."

### **Ruling class responses**

The current Democratic Party government is weak and divided. Since its first Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio was humiliated by Obama into accepting ongoing US imperial dominance in Okinawa, the government has limped through crisis after crisis, directionless and despised by both big business and ordinary people. A section of the party – led by faction leader Ozawa – split over increases to a GST-style tax. Much like Labor in Australia, the Democratic Party is caught between its desire to rule for capital and its falling political stocks as it betrays and punishes its supporters. [22]

In this wider political context, the government was initially poorly placed to respond to the outpouring of public anger and fear following TEPCO's exposure. Having initially come out with commitments to end the use of nuclear power by the 2030s, within days the cabinet had reversed its position, buckling to pressure from business and nuclear industry lobbying and committing to the status quo. [23] Police repression is usually a common feature of Japanese trade unionist and activist life, and Communist Party supporters have in the past been jailed for distributing leaflets in people's letterboxes, but police actions against the nuclear movement have been very restrained, with only a handful of arrests. It seems clear that the government is committed to nuclear power, and to the nuclear industry, but lacks the will – yet – to confront the movement head-on. Meanwhile Noda's popularity ratings continue to slump, his rivals consider their options, and nationalist distractions are pulled out as attempts to deflect public attention from the crisis at home.

Other establishment figures have opportunistically tried to attach themselves to the movement bandwagon. Former Prime Minister Hatoyama has appeared at protest events, telling crowds that "We have to cherish this flow of new democracy that you are creating... We can see how far apart the distance between the public voice and the prime minister's office has become. As a former prime minister, I would like to deliver your message to the prime minister's office right now." [24] It is clear that Hatoyama and others see in the protest movement a chance to position themselves and to build an electoral support base. What is less clear is whether the movement will let itself be co-opted.

## Portrait of a movement

Marx wrote that “the tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living.” [25] This nightmare for the Japanese workers’ movement was the legacy of defeats from the 1970s. We do not have space to go into the full history, but some background is essential for grasping what is new about the current movement. The vicious repression of the 1930s and 1940s, followed by US-inspired anti-Communist purges, had left the young “New Left” of the 1960s bereft of tradition or continuity, and without links to the working class movement that might have kept them grounded in reality. As a result, and tragically, a great upsurge of youth rebellion was squandered in the 1970s, as socialist activists turned to ultra-left stunts (and sometimes terrorism), inter-left warfare and a glorification of violence. Increasing state repression produced within the left a culture of confrontation, and so-called “socialist” groups engaged in battles with each other, battles which by the end of the 1980s had left over 100 activists dead, murdered by other socialists. The remnants of these thuggish and sectarian groups still exist, and their antics discredited both protest and socialist politics in the minds of many working class Japanese people. That legacy of bitterness and regret is still felt very strongly today.

For this reason, some of the most radical aspects of Japan’s protest movement may not look all that audacious to Western eyes. There have been no big confrontations, few inspiring moments of defiance to compare with UK students rioting at Millbank Tower or Greek workers engaging in pitched battles. But, for Japan, the fact that ordinary workers are protesting at all reveals a big step forward in popular consciousness. It is the mass nature of these demonstrations that is significant: if Japan has not yet seen a full radicalisation, it is currently in the middle of a widespread politicisation. This should give heart to socialists everywhere. “I don’t normally come to protests but because it was for No Nukes I thought I could come along to just check it out”, one woman told protest organisers in Kyoto. [26] In normalising public protest once more, this movement can spill out into other areas of life. The revolutionary socialist newspaper Kakehashi captured some of the ways this movement raises further questions when they quoted a high school student protesting at the monster rally which surrounded Parliament: “We want the government to tell us kids the truth. We want the right to decide what to do with nuclear power plants.” [27]

The “tradition of the dead generations” weighs on this movement still, though. Many demonstration organisers have stressed the apolitical nature of their movement, asking people not to bring organisational banners or “non-related” signs to anti-nuclear demonstrations. Organisers have gone out of their way to stress their friendly relations with the police, bowing to them and thanking them for their hard work at the end of demonstrations. [28] Although the demonstrations are overwhelmingly working class in composition, it has been celebrities, prominent citizens and middle class figures who have dominated the stages and publicity of these events, not unionists.

The anti-nuclear movement is dominated by two main coalition groups: Sayonara Genpatsu Issenmannin Akushon (Goodbye Nuclear Power, 10 Million People in Action), a larger grouping drawing together older, more well-established campaign groups, intellectuals and writers, Kenzaburo Oe most famously; and the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes, a younger and newer formation. Although the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes has a more radical image and more youthful energy, both coalitions have contributed towards mass mobilisations and both tap into similar social sentiments, drawing in comparable social forces.

Political distinctions between the two mobilisations offer clues as to how this struggle may develop, and what social forces and politics are in play. The big rally in Yoyogi-Uehara, organised by Kenzaburo Oe and others, was notably older than the Friday night gatherings outside the Prime Minister’s office have been. There are several strands to the movement; Sayonara Genpatsu gathers

together many from the 1960s generation and the “old” New Left, while around the Metropolitan Coalition Against Nukes – and beyond it in fledgling non-aligned groups – younger sets of activists are trying out different political programs and analyses. Many of these people have never been involved in any protest movements before.

This movement’s aversion to politics will, in the future, become a problem. As the government presses on with its plans to restart reactors and lock the nuclear industry into Japanese capitalism, questions of strategy, politics, and analysis will become urgent. There is a huge political gulf between the political desires the anti-nuclear movement shows are so widespread and the organisational forces active and able to make these desires take form. The Japanese Communist Party, for a few years towards the end of the last decade, experienced a boom in youth membership and interest, and seemed to be set for a generational revival, but this has not translated into electoral success, and besides, the party’s politics and structures remain unresponsive and moribund. [29]

It is too soon to dismiss the possibility of an organisational breakthrough coming out of this movement, though, and certainly it presents an opportunity for activists with socialist politics to argue their case to an audience much bigger than has existed, and much more buoyant than has been possible, for a long time. There is a real sense that this is a moment to seize; protester Naoki Okada told the Mainichi Shinbun at one of this year’s weekly Friday rallies that “If we’re going to be rid of them, now’s the time... It took just months for Japan to get to zero operational reactors, so why do we need to restart any?” Okada said. “I wanted to strike now, while everyone’s determination not to let this pass is united.” [30]

Certainly, some leaders in the movement feel this limitation already, and are pushing their way towards overcoming it. Political clarification becomes possible as activists get a sense of their potential power. Amiyama Karin first became famous in Japan as an ultra-nationalist and right wing punk singer; she has radicalised to the left over the last years and is now a spokesperson for an anti-nuclear group. Her new political direction was made clear in a speech she gave to one of the mass rallies: “The way the media talk about us has changed. A new awareness of direct democracy has emerged. It’s time to change history... We’ve held weekly Friday vigils outside the PM’s office since the end of March. The number of participants grew from there and now is a social movement. We are gaining momentum.” [31]

The challenge facing the Japanese socialist left is to build on that united “determination not to let this pass”.

## **Ideological breakthroughs**

One way this can be achieved is through the links between the economic and environmental crisis. The disaster, for POSSE organiser Iwahashi Makoto, has prompted a break with pro-ruling class ideas, and gives anti-capitalist ideas a chance to get a wider hearing:

The disaster resulted in untold damage, but it also provides us with an opportunity. Up until now, the idea of “self-responsibility” has been dominant in Japan. That is, welfare issues were not seen as a question of poverty, but as a problem with the poor themselves and their attitudes and choices. Some 2.05 million people currently receive welfare – a record high. This is not, however, viewed as structural poverty by society. Even people on welfare have internalised the idea of self-responsibility. Beneficiary bashing continues even after the quake. Our starting point has to be a struggle against the hegemonic idea of self-responsibility that pervades Japanese society.



When this kind of consciousness develops, we will be able to take advantage of the political situation the earthquake has produced. For the first time in Japan, everyone can see that a large number of people have been pushed into poverty because of circumstances beyond their control, and not because of their own actions. These people are victims. But the earthquake, while an extraordinary event, is not the only factor that pushed these victims into poverty. It has exposed deeper structural problems in Japanese capitalism.

We are currently forming a movement to demand a decent standard of living by tackling issues victims face. We want to link this to a struggle against neoliberalism and capitalism. We believe that addressing the issues of the affected areas is an important way to fight the ongoing hegemony of anti-welfare ideas of self-responsibility. [32]

There are signs this kind of wider social critique is starting to spread. The revolutionary socialist Kakehashi reported on an October demonstration in Hibiya Park as a stand for change and for “the politics of dignity”. [33]

What is to be done?

We are not in a position, from abroad, to offer tactical advice to our friends and comrades in the Japanese anti-nuclear movement. The excitement this movement offers is its picture of a new generation searching out their own traditions, their own questions, their own answers. In part old lessons need to be relearned; it is in the experience of building a movement that a new generation finds the confidence to challenge existing authority and power.

The stakes are very high. Contamination around Fukushima will cause displacement, loss and health damage for working people for many years, if not decades, and yet the Japanese ruling class has made it clear they are committed to maintaining the nuclear industry. TEPCO, with its history of appallingly slack safety standards, has given no indication it will be changed. All the issues of Japanese capitalism remain. So this is a movement that needs to win.

What activists abroad can see, and participate in, though, is the revival of a battle of ideas on the Japanese left. The movement has opened a space up for the discussion of all sorts of issues – from the limits of the ideology of “self-responsibility” to the potential power of the working class – and has provided an inspiration for older activists to reconnect with new social forces and young workers.

### **Slow train coming**

Veterans like Kunitomi Kenji and his comrades in the Revolutionary Communist League and National Council of Internationalist Workers and militants who stuck to a vision of working class self-emancipation through the repression of the 1970s, the sectarian disasters of the 1980s and the apolitical emptiness of the 1990s are now part of a movement drawing in tens of thousands of people who have never protested before.

Their challenges lie before them. The movement is bound to come up against a more serious ruling class opposition, and to find some of its own ambiguities and political confusions forced into confrontation and clarification. What will come of it? There will be much for us to learn.

The stance one protester took when interviewed by the Akahata outside the Prime Minister’s residence shows what lies ahead. “If we slow down,” he said, “we won’t get to our goal.” [34]

**Dougal McNeill**

---

## P.S.

\* Marxist Left Review, No.5 Summer 2013:

[http://marxistleftreview.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=88:japan-politics-and-struggle-after-the-tsunami&catid=42:number-5-summer-2013&Itemid=81](http://marxistleftreview.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=88:japan-politics-and-struggle-after-the-tsunami&catid=42:number-5-summer-2013&Itemid=81)

---

## Footnotes

[1] David McNeill and Kunitomi Kenji, from the Japanese Revolutionary Communist League, offered comments on an earlier draft of this piece. I have benefited from hearing Chie Matsumoto's speeches at Marxism 2012 in Melbourne, although she is not responsible for the analysis presented here. All translations from the Japanese are by Shomi Yoon. How one's name appears is a personal matter, and so I have followed name order as it appears in the sources; some Japanese names thus appear with the surname first.

[2] "Above-limit radioactive cesium detected in Fukushima tobacco, JT says", Japan Times, 11 October 2012.

[3] "Cesium above new limit in Miyagi beef," Japan Times, 18 October 2012.

[4] Nick Crumpton, "'Severe Abnormalities' found in Fukushima butterflies", BBC News, 13 August 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-19245818>.

[5] David McNeill, "Crippled Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant at One Year: Back in the Disaster Zone", The Asia Pacific Journal, Vol.10, Issue 9, No.4, February 27 2012, <http://www.japanfocus.org/-David-McNeill/3700>.

[6] Justin McCurry, "Fukushima disaster could have been avoided, nuclear plant operator admits", Guardian (UK), 15 October 2012.

[7] NPO Posse, "Book review: The Silent Killer: Nuclear power plant workers exposed to radiation", [http://blog.goo.ne.jp/posse\\_blog/e/a20853f2f707f355](http://blog.goo.ne.jp/posse_blog/e/a20853f2f707f355) dab64b49ed71e75c.

[8] "The Official Report of the Fukushima Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Committee: Executive Summary", Tokyo: National Diet of Japan, 2012, p.9.

[9] David McNeill, "The Fukushima Nuclear Crisis and the Fight for Compensation", The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol.10, Issue 10, No.6, March 5 2012, <http://www.japanfocus.org/-David-McNeill/3707>.

[10] "The Japanese People Won't Accept it Any Longer," Transnational Institute, 5 March 2012, <http://www.tni.org/interview/japanese-population-wont-accept-it-any-longer>.

[11] Iwahashi Makoto, from a speech first published in translation in Left21, paper of the Korean revolutionary socialist group All Together. This translation is from the original, unpublished Japanese.

- [12] See R. Taggart Murphy, "Bubblenomics," *New Left Review*, 57, May-June 2009.
- [13] POSSE Members' Blog, June 2011, [http://blog.goo.ne.jp/posse\\_blog/e/93a3e575eeeebbef50f7ced2383d9a7?fm=rss](http://blog.goo.ne.jp/posse_blog/e/93a3e575eeeebbef50f7ced2383d9a7?fm=rss).
- [14] Quoted in Dougal McNeill, "Japan: Hope, and Hashism", *Overland* blog, 25 June 2012, <http://overland.org.au/blogs/bungei-sensen/2012/06/japan-hope-and-hashism/>.
- [15] "Bye-Bye Nukes Kyoto", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXHUA2Adv7I&feature=relmfu>.
- [16] Akahata, 14 October 2012, [http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-10-14/2012101414\\_02\\_1.html](http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-10-14/2012101414_02_1.html).
- [17] Eriko Arita, "Citizens Groups Propel Rising Wave of Antinuclear Activism," *Japan Times*, 19 August 2012.
- [18] Hiroko Tabuchi, "Protests Challenge Japan's use of Nuclear Power," *New York Times*, 11 June 2011.
- [19] See Jake Adelstein and Nathalie Stucky, "Japanese Government Literally Surrounded by Antinuclear Protesters", *Japan Subculture Research Centre*, 30 July 2012, <http://www.japansubculture.com/japanese-government-literally-surrounded-by-anti-nuclear-protesters-on-sunday/>.
- [20] Hiroko Tabuchi, "Tokyo Rally is Biggest Yet to Oppose Nuclear Plan," *New York Times*, 16 July 2012.
- [21] "Demonstration outside Prime Minister's Office", Akahata, 12 September 2012, [http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-09-22/2012092201\\_03\\_1.html](http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-09-22/2012092201_03_1.html).
- [22] See Gavan McCormack, "Obama vs. Okinawa", *New Left Review*, 64, July-August 2010.
- [23] Justin McCurry, "Japan drops plans to phase out nuclear power by 2040," *Guardian* (UK), 19 September 2012.
- [24] LaborNet Japan, "Movement against nuclear energy, government escalates," 9 August 2012, <http://labornetjp.blogspot.co.nz/2012/08/movement-against-nuclear-energy.html>.
- [25] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) in *Surveys from Exile*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p.147.
- [26] "Bye Bye Nukes Kyoto".
- [27] "Rally surrounds parliament," Kakehashi, 29 July 2012, <http://www.jrcl.net/frame120806a.html>.
- [28] Jake Adelstein and Nathalie-Kyoko Stucky, "Nuclear Power Protests Find Wide Support in Japan", *The Daily Beast*, 19 August 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/19/nuclear-power-protests-find-wide-support-in-japan.html>.

[29] See Kaye Broadbent, "Japan's New Radicalism", Socialist Alternative, June 2009, [http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=4058:japans-new-radicalism&Itemid=389](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=4058:japans-new-radicalism&Itemid=389).

[30] "Giant Antinuclear rally in Tokyo draws protesters from all walks of life," Mainichi Shinbun, 17 July 2012, <http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20120717p2a00m0na008000c.html>.

[31] "After the July 29 Rally", Kakehashi, 6 August 2012, [http://www.jrcl.net/frame\\_120806a.html](http://www.jrcl.net/frame_120806a.html).

[32] Iwahashi, Left21 (see footnote 11).

[33] Kakehashi, 22 October 2012, available at [www.jrcl.net](http://www.jrcl.net).

[34] Akahata, 21 September 2012, [http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-09-22/2012092201\\_03\\_1.html](http://www.jcp.or.jp/akahata/aik12/2012-09-22/2012092201_03_1.html).