

14. Nuclear Housework

& the Enraged Mothers & Farmers of Japan

Todos Somos Japon New York, September 2011¹

Our thoughts should go especially to the women of Japan who, we are told, are those who are most strongly opposed to the government propaganda about patriotism and sacrifice. We understand they are struggling to resist this suicidal logic, which demands their families consume radioactive products to show the world that all is well in this country and a nuclear disaster is something we can live with. Their struggle is our struggle and their resistance needs our support.

– Silvia Federici.

¹Todos Somos Japon is a project of network building, of creating a current in and out of Japan, to support Japanese activists and movements and for a new association of the struggling people of the world.

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The following is an edited version of the presentations that women activists in Japan have made at the American Friends Center in New York, on September 22, 2011, to denounce the situation that has developed in their country following the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, and the refusal of the Japanese government and TEPCO, the electric power company that owns the nuclear plants, to evacuate and relocate the people exposed to radiation, except for those in the immediate vicinity of the reactors.

The decision to come to the US was prompted by the yearly convening of the General Assembly of the United Nations which the President of Japan is attending. The women knew that he would come to reassure the world that everything is fine in Japan and decided to come too, to tell their stories and bring their demands for relocation and reliable information to a broader stage.

They have come to denounce that they are trapped, that they have been abandoned by the government and TEPCO, and have no money to move, do not know where to go, do not know what will happen to them, living in a place where every day they and their family are exposed to very high levels of radiation. On the same day of their presentation, the “mothers” also held a demonstration in front of the UN, to protest the curtain of silence that has been drawn on their plight and alert the public to the dangers of nuclear power.

History

On March 2011, the nuclear reactors at Fukushima Daiichi plant were stricken by an earthquake and a tsunami.

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Immense amounts of radioactive materials have since traveled throughout Northeast Japan. The land and people have been contaminated. But many residents in the area were told that they did not have to evacuate as everything was alright and they could carry on with their lives. Rather than doing the utmost to guarantee the safety of the population, in the wake of the disaster, the Japanese government has raised the maximum limit of radiation considered safe from 1mSv (millesieverts) to 20mSv - note that after Chernobyl the maximum limit adopted for exposure was 5mSv. This new measure allows children who are more vulnerable to the effects of radiation to be exposed to doses 20 times higher than the normal standard. Changing the maximum limit of 'safe' radiation exposure has served originally to claim that only those within a 12 miles distance from the reactors should be evacuated. Later the area to be evacuated was expanded to a radius of 20 KM (12,5 miles) on April 22. But the problem is far more dramatic than these measures acknowledge. The effects of radiation are being felt as far as Tokyo, 150 miles away from Fukushima, where apparently the water system is now contaminated; so are the aquifers of a large area around Fukushima. And the economic consequences of the nuclear disaster affects an even broader range of people.

One of the women activists who testified at the American Friends' gathering, Yukiko Anzai, told us, for instance, that she is from the island of Hokkaido, which is 630 KM from Fukushima, but her family's life has been hugely impacted by the disaster. She and her husband are organic farmers and during the winter they keep their bees near Fukushima, so now they must throw away all the honey

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they have produced because it is contaminated. They also feed their chickens with fishmeal, but now fear that this too is contaminated, which in, her view, means the end of Japanese agriculture.

The government is not helping, neither financially nor logistically, those who need to relocate. They would still have to pay taxes on their homes, they have no place to go, no guarantee about their future. Thus, of the 300.000 children in Fukushima area only 3.000 have been evacuated. Some were able to leave in the summer but now they have to come back to go to school, despite the fact that the buildings are contaminated.

The government has withheld information concerning the levels of contamination present in the waters, the fisheries, the soil, the air, the food. Instead of providing reliable figures, it has made repeated appeals to patriotism urging people living near Fukushima to carry on with their lives and even continue to eat this area's produce. They have issued a leaflet "To Respond to Pregnant Women and Mothers with Small Children with Anxiety Towards The Effects of Radiation," where with pretty-colored illustrations and texts they advise women that water is safe to drink and even if they eat contaminated food it will have no health effects. Their breast milk will be completely safe for nursing, and if they get too anxious about the radiation this will have negative effects on their babies. Authorities are also coming down on people who tell the truth. A teacher said that she talked about the radiation to her students; but she was called by the principal and told that she had to stop right away or she would lose her job. She also reported that when one of her colleagues wanted to evacuate his family the other teachers yelled at

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him, and after he left they kicked his desk, and from then on he was completely ostracized.

People, however, have not remained passive. After the accident, activists in Japan contacted the survivors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima and asked them what they had done to protect themselves, receiving useful suggestions e.g. about which food stuff to eat, how to monitor their movements. Women have been in the forefront. Faced with this crisis, Fukushima mothers have been mobilizing to survive through everyday life, and protect their families, not wanting to see their children die of contamination. They are raising their voice against the government and TEPCO [demanding a] wider evacuation effort and compensation for the homes they have to abandon. And they are taking their Geiger Counters in hand to monitor the radioactivity [levels] on their own, despite the government's attempt to discredit their findings. A mother cried in the face of the officials [telling] them to eat the bag of contaminated soil she brought from a schoolyard where her children play. As the government is doing nothing to help, people are trying on their own to decontaminate some places, like the schools for the children. But because the environment is so radioactive, the areas cleaned up soon become contaminated again. Now many mothers in Tokyo and other groups all over Japan are checking food, they check the urine, to test level of radiation. They found that many people have already been internally affected. With this monitoring they have also found that evacuation helps, because after being away from the contaminated area, the radiation level in the body goes down.

However, throughout the Fukushima area, families and communities are torn apart, as those who have decided

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to remain look at the others who move as traitors who are putting their lives in jeopardy by telling the world that the food produced at Fukushima is not safe. Often the same family is split, as the women usually do all they can to move or at least send their children away, while the husbands want to remain. Many families are divided not only emotionally but physically, as women and children leave, coming back only once a month. And the mothers who remain are also torn, between believing the safety myths the government promotes and facing the day to day threats posed by the invisible radiation that is contaminating, their bodies, their environments and people's minds. Should I evacuate or should I stay? Should I eat or not eat? Should I make my kids wear masks and long sleeves or not? Should I let my kids play outdoor? Should I raise my voice or keep my mouth shut? These are questions every mother is constantly asking.

Meanwhile, no solution is in sight for how to deal with the exploded reactors, the ongoing escape of radioactive gasses, and the outflow of the waters used to cool the reactors into the sea. At best there is talk of excavating a trench around the plants, so the radioactive material does not spread into the environment. Still, the government is urging people to carry on "business as usual." There is even evidence that radioactive sludge produced by the Fukushima reactor is being sold to fertilizer companies, which means that the contamination is bound to spread throughout the country and it will be even more difficult for the inhabitants of the Fukushima area to validate their claims. Also, it seems that the Japanese Government is now planning to send products from Fukushima area to 'third world' countries under the guise of 'food aid.'

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As of now only 11 nuclear plants are operating of the 54 that had been operating in Japan, as dozens were shut down after the incident because of their similarity with the one in Fukushima. But now TEPCO wants to restart some, despite the fact that the causes of the accidents have not been properly investigated. Fukushima's mothers and an anti-nuclear organization that was formed after the accident are doing everything they can to stop it. They have sat in front of the government offices. But on August 17th, a company rep deceptively claimed they had received the approval from a local community for the reopening of a plant (Tomari 3) [local governments in Japan have the ability to block nuclear facilities restarts]. This is because of the great amount of corruption that exists at the higher levels of the Japanese Government and business, and the revolving door principle whereby government officers and TEPCO officers are tied by many threads and complicity agreements, also extending to the academic world, the scientists, the media, members of the judiciary. Thus, in July the government passed a law to help TEPCO to avoid bankruptcy, while the victims of the accident have no relief, no guarantee for their future, and have to organize their own evacuations. Colonial relations and militarism are also part of the problem. There are 135 US bases in Japan, for which Japan itself pays a considerable amount of money. In fact, Japan pays two billion dollars just for Okinawa, the same amount it has allocated for the decontamination of the area around Fukushima. And now the government is talking of spending one billion dollars to fix fighter jets that need to be repaired.

There are many in Japan who now believe that TEPCO, the Government officers who ignored safety standards, and

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all those responsible for the disaster and for withholding information should be tried for crimes against humanity, in fact, for crimes against all living things.