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Heroes or Victims? - The

Matthew Penney

Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.

英雄か犠牲者か—”福島の五十人”

By Matthew Penney -- The Fukushima plant workers have been widely lionized but who they are, why they work under such desperate conditions, and how they are being treated is less discussed. On the 29th, however, the Tokyo Shimbun published an article that sheds light on some unpleasant realities behind the heroic “Fukushima Fifty” (workers at the plant really number in the hundreds) story.

Under the title “We’ll give you $5000 a day”, the article describes how the company is having difficulty finding and keeping volunteers at stricken reactor site. TEPCO is seeking workers from subcontractors and related companies. Workers who have evacuated from Fukushima prefecture are being offered large sums of money to return to labor at the plant. A worker who declined the offer, Fukuda Ryuta, is quoted as saying that he knows of men past their fifties who have been enticed to return by large cash offers. Others testify that they fear losing their jobs if they do not undertake potentially dangerous work at Fukushima Daiichi. TEPCO and related dispatch companies are reported to be deliberately searching for workers over 50 to take on dangerous jobs.

The conditions of work and employment at Fukushima have reminded some commenters of Japan’s longstanding kakusa (social disparity) debate. Japan’s labor market, which once clung to a “lifetime employment” ideal, is increasingly characterized by stark disparity between regular employees who can expect job security and steady pay increases, and temporary and dispatch workers on tenuous and short term contracts. Are the “Fukushima Fifty” a committed TEPCO vanguard, or the castoffs of Japan’s employment system who are being brought in for a highly paid suicide mission?

Jiji reports that the workers who are at the Fukushima site are labouring in conditions made even more difficult and unpleasant by a lack of food and poor sleeping conditions. They eat and sleep in a structure near the reactors that is equipped with a sophisticated filtration system. Inside, radiation readings are at 2-6 microsieverts per hour or approximately the equivalent of a dental x-ray. They eat twice daily. Breakfast is approximate 30 biscuits and vegetable juice. Dinner is emergency rice rations and tinned meat or fish. They sleep on the floor and not all have blankets. Why TEPCO has allowed them to continue to work in such miserable conditions has not yet been made clear. There seems to be a great gap, however,

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between the hero status that the men have been afforded in the media and the way that they are being treated on site.

Matthew Penney is an Assistant Professor of History at Concordia University, Montreal. He is a Japan Focus associate who researches contemporary Japanese cultural history.

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