

An interview with Linda Gunter of Beyond Nuclear: “This was a preventable catastrophe”

By Barry Grey
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The World Socialist Web Site spoke with Linda Gunter, the international specialist at Beyond Nuclear, an anti-nuclear advocacy group based in the Washington, DC, area.

Barry Grey: Have you formed an assessment of what is happening in Japan?

Linda Gunter: As best as anyone can, based on the information we have access to. We've seen a lot of conflicting information, a lot of changing stories. We suspect that a lot of information is somewhat downplayed or not fully forthcoming. The conclusions we can draw are based on the pictures we are seeing and the information we can get, but clearly there's been a release of radioactivity.

Any release of radioactivity is dangerous to human health, so we're concerned that the evacuation in and around Fukushima is not great enough, certainly not for women and children, who are the most vulnerable.

A lot of attention has been put on the reactor itself, the core and whether or not there is a meltdown. But the spent fuel pool issue, which you talk about in your article, is of equal if not greater concern, particularly at the number four reactor, where there have been a couple of fires.

Four, five and six—all the reactor fuel is in those waste fuel pools. So if they burn and release their radioactive inventory, that's a very devastating possibility.

Some of the reports we've been seeing say that the radioactivity in the air is being attributed more to unit four, because of the fuel pool fires. But we've seen these roofs blow off in one and three, and the fuel pools in this design—of which we have 23 in the US—are outside of the containment, basically on the roof. So when we saw those explosions, that meant that the fuel pool was exposed to the environment.

There's a double whammy. They've got to keep the reactor cores of the three operating reactors cool, but they've also got to keep these spent fuel pools cooled, and it's a terrifying scenario that's unfolding. With 50 people,

apparently, that's what they're saying. They've got a 50-person work force who are sacrificing themselves to try to stop six simultaneous disasters.

BG: Are you aware of the record of TEPCO in terms of safety violations?

LG: Somewhat. But it's not just TEPCO. You can look at the US utilities and the safety violations and the cutting of corners and looking the other way by the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission. This gamble has been going on since the dawn of the nuclear age. This is the third time now that we're seeing a major catastrophe unfold because of it.

But we've been lucky hundreds of times. The consequences of things going wrong in this particular technology are so great that it is unacceptable to rely on luck to prevent it. It is like when the BP spill happened. A lot of people said it was not an accident, it was a preventable catastrophe. An accident is out of your hands. This disaster in Japan wasn't.

BG: Do you have any idea how many serious incidents have occurred in the United States?

LG: I saw a piece from Greenpeace the other day that said 200 near misses. They do have it listed. That's just the US, in the 20-year span between Chernobyl in 1986 and 2006.

The issue is the loss of power. People are saying, well it was the earthquake that did it or the tsunami. But it was the loss of power that created this crisis. I've been arguing with the nay-sayers here who say, well, you wouldn't get a tsunami in Vermont. But you could have a loss of power in Vermont from an ice storm. We've had incidents in the northeast where we lost power because one tree fell down.

That's the concern. Then you're relying on these backup diesel generators which are not reliable. Then you go to battery, which is what they had to do in Japan, which have a finite life.

When it's a flimsy reliance on the grid, which is already old and brittle here, to stop these things from going into crisis, it's insane to continue with it.

BG: What do you think about the response of the Obama administration? On Tuesday, Energy Secretary Chu testified and said that they're going ahead with their plans to expand construction and production of nuclear power.

LG: I read that in your piece. I was staggered to see that because I hadn't realized he'd said that. All I can say is that we hope the jury is still out on what the Obama administration will ultimately decide to do. Up until now, the administration has supported nuclear power. They've asked for loan guarantees for nuclear energy. They've allocated a loan guarantee for the Vogtle plant in Georgia to build a new reactor there against the wishes of the people in the community. Steven Chu is in favor of nuclear power. It's been an uphill battle.

Now is the moment, with enough of us putting on the pressure, this is really the only chance we have of turning that position around. Whether it will turn around or not remains to be seen, I think.

The crisis in Japan is still ongoing. We know it's bad, but we don't yet know exactly what's going to happen in the end. What we want to try to do immediately, regardless of the position on expansion—the existing reactors is what we need to be concerned about as well. What we've been saying for a long time is to shut now at least the boiling water reactors, the Mark ones, same as Fukushima, of which we have 23 in the US. That's the first thing we have to do. It's unacceptable to put your own people at that kind of risk.

This is the most vulnerable design we have. Albeit we are in favor of a complete phase-out, but the one thing you could do today, as the Germans are doing, is to shut down the most vulnerable.

The Obama administration was predictable, I guess, because Obama is from Illinois, the state with the most reactors in the country. That's where the headquarters is of Exelon, which is the biggest nuclear utility in the country. John Rowe, who is the CEO of Exelon, is a friend of the Obama administration. Rahm Emanuel, who is now the mayor of Chicago, got wealthy creating Exelon. He called John Rowe when he was offered the White House job to ask if he should take it. David Axelrod was a paid lobbyist for Exelon.

Exelon was a contributor to the campaigns of Obama, both for the Senate and for president.

So Obama's inner circle has been peopled by guys who come from a background that is cozy with the nuclear power industry. So to put a different perspective in front of Obama is difficult.

BG: His record clearly does not portend that he's going to anything other than service the industry, especially when you look at his response to BP.

LG: When he got in, people were very hopeful about him

and, we were skeptical. When he started this track on nuclear we were not surprised at all. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised. It was completely predictable. I think he's a corporate guy. That's who he is.

Unfortunately, our political system in this country means that pretty much anybody who gets into that position of power comes from that kind of situation because of the money you need to get elected. So the whole thing is controlled by the corporate sector.

The lobbying power of these industries—it's incredibly compromised. It's controlled completely by who has the most money.

BG: What do you think it says about the commitment of Obama and the Democratic Party to the environment? Supposedly he is a "green" president, yet here you have the most potentially catastrophic environmental disaster in history. It's still unfolding. Nobody really knows how disastrous the outcome will be. How many thousands, or hundreds of thousands of people in the end might be seriously injured or killed—and they're announcing that they're going ahead. What does that say about his commitment to the environment?

LG: A good question. From the congressional point of view, there's very blurry line between the Democrats and the Republicans. They even change parties some of the time. Obviously it's harder when Congress is controlled by the Republicans, but it's not particularly better when it's controlled by the Democrats, with a few rare exceptions.

In terms of getting a real commitment to a green agenda, it goes back to what I said before: coal, oil and nuclear are a big con game. They are the ones that have the big bucks and the lobbying power and they buy the agenda.

My view is that the only way to change it is not beating your head against the brick wall of Capitol Hill, but to get the American public to truly understand what is being done to them and what kind of risks we're taking, from a health point of view and from an environmental point of view.

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