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Attending the Global Conference for a Nuclear Free World in Yokohama

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The nuclear disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant has sparked an anti-nuclear renaissance in Japan and around the world. This renaissance has facilitated new encounters between activists in Japan and abroad and led to the strengthening of existing networks. For example, solidarity actions were held around the world to coincide with the large Genpatsu Yamero (Stop Nuclear) demonstrations held in Tokyo last year. The revival of anti-nuclear sentiment in Europe following the Fukushima disaster saw Germany announce plans to abandon nuclear power while in a referendum held in Italy last year a majority voted against the development of nuclear energy. In the context of this growing global anti-nuclear movement the Global Conference for a Nuclear Free World was held at the Pacifico convention centre in Yokohama from 14–15 January this year. The stated purpose of the conference was to

give birth to concrete support for the people of Fukushima, be a further step towards creating a future without nuclear power plants, and develop into ongoing global action.’ (Yoshioka 2012)

The conference attracted 11,500 people over two days including 100 international guests from 30 countries (Global Conference 2012). I attended the conference on both days as an assistant translator for five Australian guest speakers. In this essay I provide an overview of the conference from the point of view of a participant.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CONFERENCE

The conference was organized by a committee made up of several large Japanese Non-Governmental Organizations including Peace Boat, the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies, Green Action, the Citizen’s Nuclear Information Center, FoE (Friends of the Earth) Japan and Greenpeace Japan. Peace Boat, which played a central role in coordinating the event, is one of the largest Non-Governmental Organizations in Japan. Founded in 1983, Peace Boat’s primary activities revolve around annual international peace voyages on its own cruise ship during which participants take part in peace and sustainability education activities on board while visiting civil society organizations in various parts of the world. Since the March 2011 earthquake the organization has been coordinating a disaster relief project in Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture. The Yokohama conference organizing committee was chaired by Peace Boat Co-Founder and Director Tatsuya Yoshioka. In a press conference Tetsunari Iida, Director of the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies, acknowledged the central role of Peace Boat in assuming the financial risk of organizing the conference and providing all of the office staff (Iida 2012).

In the organization of such a large and therefore expensive conference the role of large, well-established NGOs such as Peace Boat was obviously critical. However, the conference itself would not

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have happened without the contributions of a vast number of smaller organizations. A number of smaller organizations cooperated in organizing the conference while others provided financial support. A large number of citizens' movements (*shimin undō*), church groups, cooperatives and labour unions also endorsed the conference. It was these smaller organizations that convened many of the individual sessions that made up the conference program.

This multi-layered organizational structure facilitated a variety of different levels of participation. This included large-scale financial and logistical support by the larger NGOs, the organization of workshops and conference sessions by smaller NGOs and citizen groups and the participation of the thousands of individuals who engaged in discussion and debate over the two days. This diffuse organisational structure reflects a trend towards decentralized organizational networks in social movement activism in Japan that has been observed since the early 2000s (Michiba 2005: 608).

OVERALL DESCRIPTION

Upon arriving at the conference on the first day I was surprised to see large numbers of people lined up outside waiting to get in. Throughout the two days I was frequently overwhelmed by the large number of people moving through the conference venue. Everybody seemed to have a story to tell or to want to engage in debate or discussion. The conference included large sessions, such as the opening and closing events and many simultaneous smaller 'Self Organized Events' that were managed by small groups of participants from Japan and overseas. Throughout the convention centre were small information booths representing various organisations and causes. There were several exhibitions of

photographs and a cinema room in which various films were shown. A 'Fukushima Room' featured speeches and workshops by Fukushima residents. A 'Kid's Program' included 'arts workshops, dance, and play areas for children to have fun as well as learn about nuclear and energy issues.' (Global Conference 2012) The 'Forest of Action' was a central point for collecting ideas for concrete actions to be taken in support of the conference goals. These were later assembled on the conference website.

The conference began with an Opening Event attended by thousands of participants that helped set the tone for the two days. It featured speeches by Iida Testunari from one of the main organizing groups, the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies, former Fukushima Governor Eisaku Sato, Member of the European Parliament for Germany Rebecca Harms, Australian Aboriginal elder and Co-Chair of the Australian Nuclear Free Alliance Peter Watts, doctor and hibakusha Shuntaro Hida and Jordanian parliamentarian Mosafem Awamleh.

The make-up of this Opening Event reflected the conference's grounding in an international civil society that includes politicians, NGOs, professionals and activists. The speeches by two serving parliamentarians and a former Fukushima governor highlighted the conflict within global state structures over nuclear power. Rebecca Harms, as President of the GREENS/EFA Group represented the strong position of the environmental movement within many European states. The presence of Jordanian politician Motasem Awamleh reflected the controversy in his country over plans to import nuclear technology from Japan.

PROTEST AND POLICING: THE CONTESTED POLITICS OF ANTI-NUCLEAR ACTIVISM

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The Pacifico Yokohama convention center in which the conference took place, is a large multi-storey building in the heart of a redeveloped area near the port of Yokohama. The centre is accessible from the Minatomirai subway station by travelling through a large shopping mall and then crossing a raised overpass across the road to the conference centre itself. It was possible to approach the convention centre from the subway station without once stepping out onto the street. Travelling through this highly artificial environment one arrived in a convention centre where one was completely surrounded by anti-nuclear messages and people who were sympathetic to the anti-nuclear cause. I felt an intense contradiction between the hyper-modern and resource-intensive space of consumption surrounding the convention centre itself and the politics of the anti-nuclear movement inside the conference space.

Upon entering or leaving the convention centre one was reminded of the political conflict over nuclear power in Japan. The first and most obvious reminder was the significant police presence around the entrance to the conference. While it is not unusual for police to attend large events, the police also served as a reminder to participants that the issue of nuclear power is marked by conflict. The small group of plain-clothes Public Security Police (*kōan keisatsu*) at the entrance of the conference was a particularly troubling indicator of the limits of democracy in Japan. The presence of these officers sent a clear signal to attendees that by attending an anti-nuclear conference they would be subject to surveillance by the state. That this surveillance is directly connected to the active repression of dissent in Japan was attested to by the arrest of 12 anti-nuclear activists during an anti-nuclear protest on 11 September last year. A further reminder of the contested politics of nuclear power was provided by right-wing (*uyoku*)

activists who continually circled the conference venue over the two days in vans displaying large Japanese flags and broadcasting nationalist propaganda via loudspeakers.

On the first day of the conference, the 'Global March for a Nuclear Power Free World in Yokohama' protest was held in association with the conference. It was attended by approximately 5000 people who assembled in a park near the conference venue before marching through the streets of Yokohama. In accordance with the usual method of policing Japanese demonstrations, marchers were confined to one lane at the side of the road. The march itself was broken up into three separate blocs that were kept a considerable distance apart from one another by police. The sealing of protest within small blocs confined to the margins of the street reduces the overall impact of the march both in terms of its disruption of traffic, which is arguably part of the purpose of street demonstrations, but also in terms of the visual impact on passersby. These limitations provide a very visual confirmation of the precarious position of political dissent in Japan, confined to the margins of social space by heavy policing and strict surveillance by plain-clothes political police.

SELF - ORGANIZED EVENTS: THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION

The majority of sessions at the conference were made up of 'Self Organized Events' managed by groups of conference participants and guest speakers. This structure meant that within the overall framework organized by the large NGOs there was space for a wide variety of different voices. Many of these groups maintained a small booth in the exhibition spaces between individual lecture theatres and

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meeting rooms. As one walked through these exhibition spaces one was surrounded on all sides by a diverse number of groups and individuals highlighting different aspects of the nuclear fuel-cycle. As I attended the conference in the capacity of assistant translator for the Australian delegation I will reflect briefly on the activity of the Australia group. I believe that this experience was representative of similar 'Self Organized Events'.

The Australian delegates organized a 'Self Organized Event' on the uranium mining industry in Australia. This event highlighted the supply-side issues of the Fukushima crisis and exposed the role of the Australian uranium mining industry in fuelling the reactors that caused the Fukushima crisis. Approximately one hundred people attended the session. During this session each of the five delegates gave a different part of the presentation. Volunteer translators were provided by the conference organizers. There was very little time for questions or comments during the session. However, the event was not the only or even the primary means by which the Australian guest speakers interacted with the other participants. Several of the delegates participated in a 'Global Discussion Room' in which more informal discussions between guest speakers and regular conference attendees were facilitated by conference staff. The Australian delegates also organized a booth where they handed out information about uranium mining in Australia, collected signatures for a petition against uranium exports to Japan and sold t-shirts. People visiting the booth often engaged the delegates in conversation, dependent on English-language ability, and asked questions, exchanged contact details and discussed future collaborations. Two of the delegates attended the Saturday protest march where they had the opportunity to meet with protesters who were not attending the conference itself. In addition,

a number of delegates participated in a bus tour in which 60 of the guest speakers visited Fukushima city and drove to the edge of the 20-km exclusion zone around the Fukushima Daiichi plant. While organizing and attending formal conference sessions was an important part of the delegates' participation, it extended far beyond this and included countless less formal interactions with other participants.

CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Cultural and artistic responses to nuclear power and nuclear weapons featured prominently throughout the conference. In the 'Artists Lounge' a variety of musical performances were held over the two days. Some entertainers who participated in the conference, such as singer Tokiko Katō, are long-term political activists who have long supported the anti-nuclear movement and have an ongoing involvement in environmental and social justice movements. Others, such as actor Tarō Yamamoto, have taken a political stand since the Fukushima crisis.

The conference also featured a number of photography exhibitions. These included photographs from areas such as Chernobyl, Hiroshima, the nuclear waste reprocessing facility in Rokkasho village in Aomori Prefecture and photographs of hibakusha from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The harrowing photographs of children from Chernobyl made me feel terribly sad as I wondered how many children in Fukushima are likely to succumb to radiation-related illnesses in the coming years.

The Tokyo Peace Film Festival convened a 'Nuclear Power Free Film Festival' as part of the conference program including films such as Nadya's Village which examines the lives of villages affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and Hōri no Shima which chronicles a year in the small island of Iwai Shima

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on Japan's inland sea off the coast of Kaminoseki in Yamaguchi Prefecture where residents have engaged in a 20-year struggle against the construction of a nuclear power plant. I attended the screening of *Hōri no Shima* and had to stand at the back as the room was packed to overflowing with people.

In the Artists Lounge on Sunday afternoon writer and anti-poverty activist Karin Amamiya hosted a talk event with the Seifuku Kōjō Inkai, a pop idol group made up of six girls aged 12 to 17. The group has taken an active anti-nuclear stance since Fukushima with their song *Datsu datsu datsu genpatsu* (Away, away, away from nuclear power). The interview provided some insight into how the nuclear issue is perceived among school-age girls. The group members described singing about the nuclear issue as an educational experience that had caused them to think deeply about the issues. A number of the girls explained that their political activity had provided an opportunity to discuss the issue of nuclear power plants with friends at school.

CONCLUSION

The title of the conference itself, 'Global Conference for a Nuclear Power Free World', reflected one of the lines of conflict in the anti-nuclear movement. Organizers could choose between two Japanese linguistic constructions, *datsu genpatsu* (nuclear power free) and *han genpatsu* (no nuclear power), in their framing of the conference. While *han genpatsu* (no nuclear power) reflects an antagonistic opposition to nuclear power, *datsu genpatsu* (nuclear free) emphasises a movement away from nuclear power but without necessarily implying antagonism (Yoshioka 2011: 46). Organizers of the conference protest march, the *Shutoken Hangenpatsu Rengō* (Capital District Anti-nuclear Alliance) use the term

han genpatsu to describe their protest activity. The term *datsu genpatsu*, on the other hand, chosen as the overall title of the conference, was the same term used by then prime minister Naoto Kan when he announced his desire for Japan to move away from 'dependence' on nuclear power (*datsu genpatsu izon*) last year.

This discursive frame appears calculated to appeal to the broadest possible range of people and may reflect a degree of reluctance on the part of organizers to engage in confrontational and oppositional politics. However, the conflict over nuclear politics in Japan was nevertheless inescapable in an environment of heavy policing, surveillance and right-wing activity at the boundaries of the conference space. The structure of the conference and the inclusion of the protest march in the official program provided a very open space for democratic discussion and debate about an issue that is at the centre of social conflict in Japan after Fukushima. The range of sessions and activities within the conference and the holding of a demonstration outside the conference venue provided a space to address almost every conceivable issue relating to the nuclear industry from uranium mining to weapons, nuclear power and waste. The plurality of voices at the Global Conference was a testament to the diversity of the anti-nuclear movement. The global nature of the conference reflected the ongoing development of international solidarity and communication among social justice and environmental movements. The conference constituted an important intervention into the global anti-nuclear renaissance that has followed the Fukushima disaster. Its long-term effects in terms of the development of networks of solidarity throughout Japan and the world are likely to be revealed for many years to come.

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