

COMMENT

Lifting the Veil

PARLIAMENTARIANS ON THE left and, left-leaning academics have been discussing the fall-out of notorious nuclear liability bill for the last few months and quite justifiably. But they are actually fighting in the air without targeting the real issue—nuclear power itself. By any standards it is a costly proposition even in advanced countries, not to speak of under developed countries like India. They do not oppose nuclear energy in principle though the myth of “too cheap to meter” has long been shattered. True, the proposed bill would likely to perpetuate nuclear servitude but how nuclear power plants worldwide have already created health hazards and displacement is being conveniently overlooked.

In truth very little information on occurrences in nuclear industry is available because everywhere it is a tightly guarded industry. A recent book [*Nuclear Servitude : Subcontracting and Health in the French Civil Nuclear Industry*] by Annie Theband-Mary, about to be published, promises to be able to lift the veil somewhat.

France's nuclear facilities, which include 58 reactors, are half a century old. This is an industry in which risks to health in the short, medium, and long terms seem both the most dreaded and the most controversial. Every year, around 30,000 employees of "outside" companies perform maintenance in France's nuclear power plants. These workers receive 80% of the total annual occupational exposure to ionizing radiation in French nuclear plants. The sociological study presented in the book began with some workers' accounts of their experiences, and analyzes the social division of labour that divides workers' activities between highly specialized operations and "nuclear servitude"—a highly suggestive term designating the indispensable tasks that entail the most exposure to radiation while preparing for other maintenance operations.

Nuclear producers strictly observe regulatory exposure limits by managing job exposures by radiation doses and externalizing the problems. Outsourcing the risky work prevents challenges from unions and public officials, and firms can claim that radiation exposures are controlled and do not endanger workers' health. This problem, a terrible contradiction at the heart of the nuclear industry, has been socially constructed to render it invisible.

This book highlights the dangers of the "disorganization" of work through subcontracting practices, both for workers' health and for nuclear safety. It also demonstrates the adverse effects of flexibility on the production of knowledge about occupational hazards, especially the effects of low-level radiation on health. The results of this French study sound an alarm for organizational choices in the nuclear industry worldwide. □□□

[The details about the book is available at <http://boywood.com/books/previewbook>]