

# **Fukushima two year after: Deductions strip daily wage of nuclear cleanup workers down to 1,000 yen**

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Dinner is a few boiled vegetables. At lights out, each person lies down to sleep in a space the size of two tatami mats, or just over three square meters. This is no prison camp scene, but the reality of workers cleaning up radioactive contamination from the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The central government has awarded contracts for most of this decontamination work to large construction companies, which have in turn hired sub-contractors, which have themselves hired third companies, and on down through several layers of firms to the people doing the actual cleanup job. And these people, not counting their danger pay, are working for almost nothing.

“We weren’t treated like human beings,” said one 59-year-old from Aomori Prefecture, who did a two-month stint as a nuclear decontamination worker in Tamura, Fukushima Prefecture, starting in September last year. During his contract, he was billeted with three other men in a bungalow measuring just 12.4 square meters. The first dinner he ate there was a shock as well: a plate of boiled eggplant, green peppers and alfalfa sprouts. He complained to his employer, which eventually added “a couple of slices of ham” to the evening meal.

The man spent his days cutting grass on a hillside about 20 kilometers from the shattered Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant. The lunch provided by his company consisted of plain rice balls and pickled vegetables, and there were no shops nearby where he could buy something extra. When the man approached the woman in charge of meals, she told him she’d been ordered by the company to keep breakfast costs at 100 yen and dinner costs at 200 yen per worker.

“We were treated almost unbelievably roughly, especially as we were doing hard physical labor,” the man told the Mainichi. The conditions apparently proved too difficult for at least one man, a 54-year-old worker who died of a heart attack on the job in the village of Kawauchi in February this year.

The acquaintance who introduced the 59-year-old to the cleanup job told him he’d be “cutting grass along roadsides. You’ll get a place to stay, plus two meals and 11,000 yen a day.” The man actually got about that amount, but only after adding the daily 10,000 yen in danger pay provided by the central government. His company was paying him just 1,000 yen a day, or less than one-fifth of the prefecture’s per diem minimum wage.

A month after he started the job, the man’s employer sent him a new contract and told him to sign it. The space for the daily wage was blank. When he looked at a coworker’s contract, he saw that the basic daily wage was 15,700 yen — 10,000 yen in national government danger pay and 5,700 yen in wages from the company. However, the company then deducted 1,000 yen a day for food and 3,700 yen for accommodation, leaving 11,000 yen.

The firm, which is three layers of subcontracts below one of the construction companies hired by the government, told the Mainichi, “We did pay the workers danger pay in addition to their pay, but in

the absence of a labor agreement with the workers concerning deductions, we subtracted costs for room and board.”

This is the result of the subcontractor structure, putting multiple layers between the original contractor and the workers.

“Once the contracts got down to us, the danger pay had already been eaten away,” one construction company representative told the Mainichi. The firm passed the entire work order off to another company run by a friend. “At that stage, you can’t really turn a profit unless you hit the workers’ wages or shave them down somehow. In the end, the whole system is designed to make money for the big construction companies at the top.”

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\* Mainichi Shimbun, April 5, 2013

<http://mainichi.jp/english/english/newsselect/news/20130405p2a00m0na014000c.html>