

Letter from a participant in the liquidation of the consequences of the Chernobyl accident about the production process and life at the nuclear power plant

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Of course, everything was impressive — the road to Chernobyl, the checkpoint at the entrance to the 30-kilometer zone, the road signs "shoulder of road contaminated," "no entry onto shoulder of road," the uncultivated fields overgrown with weeds, the empty villages, Chernobyl itself, completely cordoned off by striped barriers, with empty and overgrown houses, people on the streets either in military uniform or in special clothing with mandatory dosimeters on their chests, then the checkpoint at the entrance to the 5-kilometer zone, and finally the plant itself, its somehow unnatural silhouette.

It's impressive, especially if you imagine what it was like here a year ago.

The situation has now lost its former urgency. Unit 4 itself (or rather, what remains of it) is now enclosed within a "sarcophagus," and the entire station grounds are covered with a two-meter layer of sand and gravel and paved (the access railway tracks, which were naturally on an embankment, now lie below the asphalt). Almost all the buildings have been decontaminated and cleaned, effectively re-roofed.

Radiation levels at the plant site are currently averaging 100-200 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$, and indoors 20 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$ (for reference: the natural background radiation level is 0.1-0.2 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$, the permissible dose rate for a limited portion of the population is 1 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$, and for professionals (category A) it is 28 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$).

Of the "hot" objects, only one remains: the turbine hall of Unit 4. On its roof, radiation levels reach 1,000,000 $\mu\text{Sv/hr}$. I don't think anyone really knows what to do with it yet. But they're currently cleaning the roof.

There's still a lot of work to do here, of course. But it's not as spectacular anymore. Therefore, the senior management of the department responsible for the clean-up here is trying to wrap up its work and report completion (mostly) by the holiday. At our level, this sense of belonging is low, and work is being done haphazardly. All the management, from foremen and site managers to district commanders, regularly drink, even though the 30-kilometer zone is "dry area", and upon entering the zone, police check luggage and practically pat down passengers at checkpoints.

Most of the workers here are so-called "partisans." They were called up for military training for retraining, and then sent here for two to three months. Their life is semi-military, and of course, there's no sense of volunteering here.

But there are civilians, too. Even now, they pay a decent salary here — 1,000-2,000 roubles or more per month, so, there are those willing to join. Especially now, when the radiation situation here is quite high.

The moral picture here is quite interesting. The bureaucratic apparatus is quite large (the number of actual employees is decreasing, but the number of managers and employees of various services is not decreasing).

Naturally, everyone — both the small bosses and the big ones, and those considered equal to them for one reason or another — is paid as if they were permanently employed at the plant. The fact is that a zone coefficient has been introduced here, by which the salary is multiplied: at the plant itself, 5-7, in Chernobyl, 2.

In reality, few of them are ever at the plant, and those who are, certainly not for 6 hours a day. These guys, I think, really don't want this blessing to end. Especially since slacking off and loafing around under the roof of the "special regime" (paradoxically, at least for now) is quite convenient.

Since wearing civilian clothes is unacceptable here in Chernobyl (it's simply forbidden at the plant), a unique Chernobyl style of clothing has developed. The highest form of attire is considered to be wearing "Afgankas" (the uniform of the limited military contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan). These, like other special clothing, are delivered here in large quantities, but there's certainly not enough for everyone. Therefore, they are worn by the bosses, those who drink with them, employees of various departments — human resources, supply, office, accounting, the ladies who (sorry) sleep with the bosses, and so on.

They behave here (at least the middle management) rather arrogantly — apparently in some ways copying the behaviour of their predecessors, who were given the truly hot work. But at the slightest counter-pressure, they back down — I think they feel they're not earning their keep, they don't want to lose their jobs, and a strong mutual responsibility hasn't had time to develop due to staff turnover. Although, a kind of departmental mafia has already formed here. For example, in the dosimetric control department, where we work, a team from Arzamas has firmly established itself.

Our work is mostly clean. We work shifts at the station. We monitor personnel exposure levels. We determine their work schedules (hours) based on the radiation situation at the work site, which we measure ourselves. Sometimes we participate in mapping radiation fields at the remaining "dirty" sites. Currently, the maximum dose for workers here is 100 mSv. I don't think we'll reach that limit.

We live in a former vocational school dormitory, three to a room. The food here is very good. Free, practically unlimited in quantity, and quite high quality. My stomach, at least, accepts the local food favourably. This is explained, I think, by the fact that stealing food here (I mean from the canteen workers) is completely pointless. You can't sell it in the zone, because no one needs it, and you can't take it outside the zone. How would you organize a catering service like that under normal conditions? There are orchards all around (Chernobyl is basically a one-story city), so there are apples and pears in abundance.

There's plenty of free time. Valera is always fishing, and Yura and I sometimes go with him. The place here is simply wonderful. Pripyat has wonderful white sand beaches, overgrown in places with willow. Pine forests filled with mushrooms are all around. I met an elderly couple here. They were native Chernobyl residents, both retired, and didn't want to live in Belaya

Tserkov, where they were relocated. They found work here (to guard something) and live in their own house. How they talk about their land! How they lament the fact that it's all been polluted!

I came up with a dark pun: Chernobyl — the city of the future. As if this hadn't actually happened.

Overall, our heroic days are going pretty routinely. I'm already feeling pretty homesick. Our trip ends on November 3rd. But maybe we'll be able to get away sooner. Say hello to Lyubasha, the hero of Chernobyl. Say hello to Dan.
Goodbye, Sergey. October 6, 1987.

Copy is correct: KGB Officer Yu. Miroshnichenko