Beside the Motoyasu River in Hiroshima, where the ribs of a dome rest on top of a mutilated brick building, Kosei Mito discussed the nuclear bombing with Canadian expat Elisabeth Fernandes one afternoon in March. He is a self-appointed guide to the Atomic Bomb Dome.

“In-utero survivor,” read a badge on a lanyard around his neck. His mother was pregnant when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima 70 years ago, on August 6, 1945.

“What is your opinion about nuclear power?” Fernandes asked. Mito's primary interest is nuclear weapons, but he gets the question often.

Mito switched easily from the Hiroshima bombing to the 2011 nuclear power plant meltdown at Fukushima. He doesn’t like Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s plans to reopen plants, which were all shut down after the Fukushima disaster.

“Abe wants to start as many plants as possible,” Mito said to Fernandes. “Two or three will start soon.”

“Is there any way to stop it?” she asked.

“No.”

Despite early successes after Fukushima, the Japanese anti-nuclear energy movement has slowly weakened, battered by a struggling economy and wealthy, politically powerful electric companies. Like Mito, most people expect the plants to restart soon.

But that hasn’t stopped many of Hiroshima’s anti-nuclear activists from continuing their fight against nuclear power. Many of the survivors have suffered the effects of radiation for 70 years, and their voices lend strength to the anti-nuclear movement. In defiance of the nuclear industry, they continue protesting and telling their stories.
Activists pass out flyers against nuclear energy on the annual commemoration of the bombing in Hiroshima. They raise money to stall the construction of reactors, and they protest at Fukushima and nuclear power plants around the country.

“The biggest role that we can play is by going to Fukushima, joining their movement and sharing our experiences,” said No-Nukes Hiroshima representative Shoji Kihara, whose parents survived the nuclear bombing.

Hiroshima survivors know the horrors of nuclear exposure well.

When the Enola Gay, a U.S. Boeing B-29, dropped the uranium bomb on Hiroshima, the people nearest the explosion disappeared entirely. Metal girders twisted, roof tiles warped, skin melted, hair singed. Soon fires began, and all who were able ran into the Motoyasu and Ōta Rivers or fled the city. Then came rain, heavy and black and full of radiation.

Later that day, people with no visible injuries died suddenly. In the coming weeks, many survivors developed purple rashes and intense fatigue — the signs of radiation poisoning. The following years brought leukemia and cancer.

As the only country that has suffered a nuclear attack, Japan seems an unlikely champion of nuclear energy.

The transformation was a result of a program called Atoms for Peace, started by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 to show the world that fission was a viable and safe form of energy. Through the program, an exhibit opened in 1956 at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum to address the “nuclear allergy” of the Japanese.

It worked. Even many hibakusha — literally, “radiation-affected people” — approved of the power plants, said Hiroshima City University professor Ulrike Wöhr, who studies the history of the anti-nuclear movement.
“There was a logic: We who suffered most should be the ones to profit and promote it,” Wöhr said. Of the two main groups of Hiroshima hibakusha, only one remained opposed to nuclear power. By 2010, fission reactors provided about 30 percent of the country’s energy.

Support for the nuclear industry collapsed after the Fukushima Daiichi meltdown in 2011, when a tsunami crashed into Japan’s north east coast. The waves swamped the reactors and disabled level after level of safety back-up. Radiation leaked from the reactors into the Pacific, the air, the soil.

Suddenly, there were more hibakusha.

More than 150,000 people had to evacuate their homes, and all the reactors were shut down.

After the meltdown, both groups of Hiroshima’s hibakusha opposed nuclear power, and they weren’t alone. Tens of thousands of protesters came from all around Japan to march in Tokyo. A 2012 PEW study found that 70 percent of the Japanese wanted their country to reduce its use of nuclear power.

Activists saw their chance to prove Japan’s reliance on nuclear power isn’t necessary, but they struggled to compete with the financial incentives to restart the reactors. As Japan’s economy slowly recovers from a recession, Prime Minister Abe plans to address the downturn through a financial program called “Abenomics,” which requires reopening the plants.

Since Fukushima, Japan’s reliance on foreign oil increased, creating a trade deficit. In recent statements, Abe said nuclear power will provide an inexpensive source of energy and help Japan decrease its dependence on fossil fuels.
Still, an October 2014 poll by Kyodo News found that 60 percent of the Japanese oppose restarting the nuclear reactors, and the anti-nuclear movement hasn’t given up. They work together to counter the clout of the nuclear industry.

In-utero survivor Kosei Mito was the only volunteer guide at the Atomic Bomb Dome eight years ago, but he slowly formed a group. Another guide is Seiji Yamaguchi, whose activism takes him to power plants around Japan.

Yamaguchi calls his trips “Peace Cycl”es, and he’s been to the plants at Nagasaki, Ikata and Shimane. There he linked arms with other activists to form a chain in protest.

He hopes to go to more demonstrations, but the next one isn’t planned yet. He’s waiting for a group to go with him.

Through collaboration, the activists have occasionally stymied the nuclear industry.

They were successful in helping the fishermen of Iwaishima Island continue preventing the Chugoku Electric Power Company from building a new reactor in the Inland Sea, just 50 miles from Hiroshima.

“[The fishermen] thought there was no possibility to build plants after Fukushima,” said Masae Yuasa, a Hiroshima City University professor and anti-nuclear energy activist. However, the company still planned to go ahead with the nuclear plant, which the Iwaishima islanders have held off since 1982.

The fishermen protect the Inland Sea by voting as a union not to accept the 1 billion yen, $8 million, offered by the company. However, many of the fishermen are in their 70s and struggle to stay out of debt.

“If they cannot pay their debt, they can't keep union membership and can't say no to the power companies,” Yuasa said.
Yuasa and two other activists decided to raise 5 million yen, about $42,000, to give to the fishermen, and money came in faster than they had hoped.

They raised 20 million yen — four times the amount they expected.

The nuclear industry is too wealthy and closely connected to the government to stop permanently, and the number of people at protests has dwindled during the past four years.

On a Friday night in March, no more than 30 people showed up at the tents where the protesters chanted and handed out pamphlets on a corner in downtown Tokyo. Those protesters recently lost a lawsuit, and they will most likely have to take down their tents soon.

“A lot of people joined the movement after Fukushima, and we had big demonstrations,” said No-Nukes Hiroshima representative Shoji Kihara. “Now it’s calming down some, and there is less interest.”

He hasn’t given up hope, though.

Kihara’s parents and older siblings survived the bombing, but his father died suddenly when Kihara was four. They drive his activism.

He fights the nuclear industry by writing, and he has published three books — From Hiroshima to Chernobyl, Hiroshima Notes and Nuclear Scandal. Kihara also gives speeches around the world. He said he’s gone to Fukushima more times than he can count.

Kihara remains cautiously optimistic, despite the restarting plants.

“This year is very important,” he said on March 18, holding up the day’s newspaper. It had just been announced that five of the older reactors will be voluntarily decommissioned, and he sees it as a victory. However, he said, the government may use the decommissioning as an excuse to build more plants.
A governmental council announced in July their plans for the country’s future energy mix, and Kihara correctly predicted they would permit 20 percent to come from nuclear energy.

“That’s no expression of regret for Fukushima,” he said. He wants it to be zero.

Even while his hopes are tempered by doubt, Kihara continues sharing his stories to strengthen the anti-nuclear movement. Another book, *The Shadow of the Nuclear Village*, will come out this year.