



Newsletter

November 96

HINKLEY B - JOBS AXED

On 8th October 1996, British Energy unveiled plans to axe 1460 jobs, 23% of its workforce in the nuclear generation industry, in an effort to keep its dividend promises. About 1200 will go from England and Wales, the rest in Scotland. There will be a reduction of 600 technical and engineering staff at the Gloucester headquarters, and the staff of 550 at Hinkley B will be reduced by over 100 during the next three years through voluntary redundancy. British Energy had previously denied that massive job losses would follow privatisation because they need to maintain safety standards and avoid reduction of output, and nuclear inspectors warned that they would block cuts if safety was compromised. They emphasised the need for plants to be shut down whenever there is any doubt about safety. The nuclear engineers union expressed their concern over safety implications and declared that the pull of the shareholder had won again.

British Energy shares, which had fallen well below their issue price of 105p, managed with heavy support in the market, to rise to 107p when the job cuts were announced. However, dividends are expected to be paid from reserves not profits for many years, especially as electricity prices are likely to fall with the build up of competition in the generation market.

Magnox Electric, who run Hinkley A, had previously stated that 30 jobs will go from the workforce of 180 as the reactor nears the end of its working life

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after the year 2000. Talks are taking place on a merger between Magnox and the state owned British Nuclear Fuels who run Sellafield. This is due to take place by 1998 provided the issue of financial support is resolved because BNFL do not want to take on Magnox's "huge burdon of liabilities".

TRAWSFYNYDD WASTE

The information now coming from official sources states that this waste will not be sent to Hinkley for incineration, although there were rumours that it had started coming from Wales during the summer. This may be because people here had shown themselves unwilling to receive it, making alternative methods of disposal preferable.

ENERGY FOR THE FUTURE

The nuclear industry seems to be in decline, with no sign of investment in its future, and uncertain funding for its decommissioning and waste disposal costs. Most of the 'fossil fuel levy', which was added to our bills to provide financial support for sources of energy other than fossil fuels, has gone to the Nuclear industry to pay for costs such as decommissioning Magnox reactors.

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However, the levy has raised £80 million for renewable energy sources. A series of targets have been set by the Government for the quantity of electricity to be supplied by renewable methods, tenders being invited from potential power producers. But getting a contract is a difficult process and renewable energy schemes are mainly being put forward by large companies. In comparison, countries like Germany give grants for renewable energy projects so many more go ahead. We could follow the example of Denmark where authorities have been able to set up many systems using combined heat and power and generation of power from city waste. However, without a national energy policy involving financial incentives and assistance our progress is slow.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR GREEN ENERGY

In 1998 the nuclear levy is to end, and with the decline in funding for research into renewable energy its future is unsure, possibly depending purely on private finance. A survey shows that two out of three consumers think some or all of the subsidy should be switched to fund green energy, and Labour favour a 3% levy for green energy so that it can achieve 10% of total production by 2010.

Many people with money to invest are choosing ethical investments, which is another way to support renewable energy, wind power being the most popular at present. The Triodos bank has loaned money for a computer controlled wind turbine on the site of a potato cold store. The Baywind Energy Cooperative has raised enough to start building wind turbines near Sellafield, and the shareholders include supporters of the Shut Down Sizewell Campaign. Wind projects could

enable the Government's target for renewable energy to be met, but they are being thwarted by the Country Guardian group, led by Bernard Ingham, who have stopped many planning applications for wind farms through their emotive, ill-informed arguments. He advises the nuclear industry. Wind power is now cheaper than nuclear energy and new coal-fired power stations, but more expensive than gas. National Wind Power, a subsidiary of National Power, has opened Europe's biggest wind farm in Wales with 56 turbines costing £26 million.

Some MPs and many local authorities would like to encourage local renewable energy initiatives. In Somerset a local business man has proposed a hydro-electric scheme for Dulverton, and the police, Victim support and SWEB have got together to provide low energy light bulbs for vulnerable victims of crime living on low incomes.

Renewable energy systems such as solar, wind, wave, biomass, biogas, coppiced timber, rape and other oils, are becoming more available as people invest in their development. The potential market for renewable technologies, especially solar power in hot countries, could be immense and create an energy supply for the 40% of the world's population who have none. However, funding for renewable energy technologies still takes up only 3% of lending by the World Bank.

PLUTONIUM AS AN ENERGY SOURCE?

As nuclear warheads are dismantled the stocks of plutonium and highly enriched uranium are piling up. The

fast breeder reactors which could use plutonium as a fuel have shown themselves uneconomic and liable to produce runaway nuclear reactions which go out of control. Meanwhile Britain, France, Japan, Russia and India continue to produce new stocks of weapons grade plutonium through reprocessing. Scientists still present this as a useful process to recycle nuclear fuel for some future use, despite the waste and pollution it produces. Though challenged by people near the reprocessing plants, for most of us they are far enough away not to be of immediate concern.

RADIATION

A LITTLE BIT DOES YOU GOOD

Some progress has been made in establishing that radioactivity is dangerous. BNFL disowned the statement by John Graham, vice president of their US subsidiary, who considers daily doses of radiation to be beneficial to health. They accept the view of the Radiological Protection Board that "all radiation is potentially a cause of cancer however small the dose". But within their industry they have to acknowledge that some exposure is inevitable, so must be acceptable. Power companies are setting up a fighting fund to contest court cases which are expected following research indirectly linking cancer to electro magnetic fields. The nuclear industry faces similar threats. A multi-million pound damages claim against the Ministry of Defence has been launched by Blue Circle Industrial Group. They claim that their offices and conference centre near Aldermaston where trident warheads are being made were found to have high levels of plutonium and uranium so are now unsaleable.

CANCER CONNECTIONS

Where there are clusters of cancers, particularly leukaemia, public health authorities do attempt to establish a cause and look for links with releases of pollution, radiation or electromagnetic fields, often without success. But lack of proof does not remove the problem and causes are being found - like the undisclosed nuclear accident at Greenham. The seventeen cases of leukaemia around the airbase are 2.5 times higher than the national average. At Dounreay there is new evidence of radiation hotspots which may arise from undisclosed accidents and the cluster there is to be investigated again for links with radiation. It was recently reported that a leak of radioactive coolant had turned up in the sea near Dounreay so the plant had to be stopped in order to find the source in its miles of piping. Radon gas, which forms from uranium in the soil and rocks, has been declared dangerous by the National Radiological Protection Board who have set thresholds above which people are advised to treat their homes.

AT CHERNOBYL a sharp rise in radiation levels inside the melted core has caused consternation among the nuclear experts highlighting the urgent need to replace the sarcophagus around the molten mass. Officials admit that they still do not have control over the nuclear fuel inside the reactor and there had been a limited nuclear chain reaction. Although they are aware of the problems they do not have the money to tackle them. Western governments are pressing the Ukraine to close the two working reactors there but they are reluctant to do this without finding an alternative electricity supply. The European commission

came up with a £2 billion aid package to include the cost of replacing the cracking concrete sarcophagus but more money is required. Meanwhile, the military want to engage in training exercises destroying abandoned Belarussian villages, against the protests of scientists about the clouds of radioactive dust and high radiation levels that would result.

SUCCESS

The worldwide network of anti-nuclear groups do sometimes influence decisions. In Italy the state electricity corporation postponed plans to send 17 spent fuel bars to Sellafield, following objections by lobbyists about the transport risks and volume of reprocessed waste to be stored. In Japan residents of Make town were consulted for the first time in a referendum and said no to a nuclear power station.

A HISTORIC MOMENT

The comprehensive test ban treaty signed on 24th September in New York is a commitment by the five "official" nuclear weapons states not to test again. We have to be hopeful that it will succeed despite the difficulty in getting 44 named countries to sign it, including India who are holding out for total nuclear disarmament.

All over the world people are working to get rid of nuclear weapons. In Australia an international forum has been set up on how to achieve a nuclear weapons free world. An international initiative called Abolition 2000 has been campaigning to rid the world of nuclear weapons by the year 2000. France has shut down 18 land based nuclear missiles, limiting nuclear defence to weapons aboard submarines and bombs. It will take two years and 400 million francs (£51

million) for the missiles dismantled.

PROTESTS

Sellafield women against the nuclear military chain have set up a peace camp which takes place every two months outside the visitors centre as a reminder that the production of more and more radioactive material must not be allowed to continue.

They are asking people so show support by writing to BNFL asking them to stop producing plutonium; fuelling the nuclear arms race and producing those radioactive emissions.



PLUTONIUM AIR TRANSPORTS

A cargo of plutonium and highly enriched uranium was blocked from leaving Ostend airport by Greenpeace activists. It was on its way from Germany to Dounreay. Politicians and trades unions also oppose plutonium transportation by the civil aviation industry. The international atomic energy agency has approved the use of containers for these transports which can withstand a fall of just 9 meters, and were designed for road travel..

NEXT SHE MEETING
TUESDAY 7TH JANUARY 1997
 ALL WELCOME
 CONTACT HESTER

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