

# Earthlife Africa Johannesburg's victory against Russian nuclear power

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## Story of a successful anti-nuclear campaign in South Africa

**Earthlife Africa has won its challenge against the South African Government's one trillion rand nuclear power plant. Dr. Tristen Taylor, former Project Coordinator (Director) of *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg's* Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Project (SECCP) narrates the process which led to this victory. While this paper is focused upon nuclear power, many of the tactics of the campaign are applicable to other struggles against mega-infrastructure projects.**

*Earthlife Africa Johannesburg* was at the forefront of that court case, which was the culmination of over a decade of active campaigning. Earthlife was often a lone anti-nuclear voice in the wasteland of South African energy policy. But the lessons, both positive and negative, of the victorious campaign against nuclear power are in danger of fading into obscurity.

We don't document our struggles. New generations of activists frequently have no history to refer to. And as the cliché goes, those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it. While this paper is focused upon nuclear power, many of the tactics of the campaign are applicable to other struggles against mega-infrastructure projects. There are, I believe, commonalities between fighting a coal-fired power station and a nuclear station.

Fundamentally, a campaign against nuclear is not about a particular way of generating electricity or a technical cost benefit analysis: it is about politics. Nuclear power is a political issue and politics today is more in line with Machiavellian domination than with the musings of Plato's wise philosopher kings. The decision to build nuclear plants is the culmination of private interests competing for power and resources: it is not the end result of rational decision-making on the basis of technical and detailed research. If rational argument won the day, we wouldn't be facing catastrophic climate change or watching as our neighbours starved.

However, as you may have guessed, this paper is a personal reflection on the nuclear struggle and not an objective piece by an impartial academic. Since I was the Project Coordinator of *Earthlife Africa Johannesburg*, I was involved in the nuclear campaigning in South Africa and for far too long to have any kind of objectivity at the present. This paper is an insider's reflection on the nuclear struggle and his analysis of the future of anti-nuclear campaigning in South Africa.

No nukes, no way, no how, not here, not anywhere> was pretty much my political orientation.

We often forget that people run civil society campaigns, and activists have all the negatives and positives of any human being. A rare few are saints, some are only in it for the money, but most are trying to make the world a better place in whatever small way they can.

On a personal note, all those years of campaigning against nuclear power, fundraising, putting together the recent court case, and managing the competing interests in the campaign burnt me out, which is not surprising. A small and underfunded non-governmental organisation (NGO) was fighting not only its own government and the state utility (Eskom) but also Vladimir Putin's Russia: the human toll was immense. The exhaustion was so great that I had to leave Earthlife Africa Johannesburg in 2016 and watch the court drama from the side lines. I was okay with that, but there is a lesson here, one of many in this paper: committed NGOs often don't take care of their staff. Somehow, individuals are supposed to be activists rather than people and end up working themselves to death like Boxer, the horse in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. You know, the struggle above all else and you're lucky to be paid.

That attitude is contrary to a successful campaign. Organisations—and by extension donors—need to provide support and care for their employees and volunteers. People, not expendable robots, campaign.

And lastly, before getting into the impacts of the court case, the history of the struggle and a view on future anti-nuclear campaigning in South Africa, I'd like to thank all of my former comrades at Earthlife Africa Johannesburg: defeating the recent push for nuclear power was a team effort.

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*Dr Tristen Taylor* was Energy Policy Officer at Earthlife Africa Johannesburg in 2006. From 2007 to 2016, he was the Project Coordinator (Director) of Earthlife Africa Johannesburg's Sustainable Energy and Climate Change Project (SECCP). For a quarter of his life, he's been campaigning against nuclear power in South Africa, from the Pebble Bed Modular Reactor (PBMR) to the recent push to procure six light water reactors.

He was also the Africa representative on the Steering Committee of the International Coal Network from 2013 to 2016. Before joining Earthlife Africa Johannesburg, he was the Apartheid Debt and Reparations Coordinator at Jubilee South Africa. He's currently a postdoctoral fellow in philosophy at Stellenbosch University and occasionally publishes in *Business Day*, *The Star* and the *Daily Maverick*.

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## **Tristen Taylor**

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