

Nuclear Energy and the European Union: The Case of France

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Contents

- [1. A turning point](#)
 - [2. An industry in decline](#)
 - [3. French pro-nuclear resistan](#)
 - [4. French anti-nuclear movemen](#)
 - [5. New challenges](#)
 - [6. Vital stakes](#)
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1. A turning point

In the coming years, the European Union (EU) will have a decisive choice to make in relation to nuclear energy. The first generation of reactors and power plants is reaching "retirement age" and will have to be phased out. If they are not replaced, it will mean the end of nuclear energy in Western Europe, and maybe its final decline in the world. If they are replaced, it will mean that the EU initiates a process that could lead to one hundred years more of nuclear energy (the time to phase out the present generation of power plants, to build and to use the second generation during all its life span).

We are really living at a turning point; all the more because the future European energy policy is not yet decided.

2. An industry in decline

The past decade, the nuclear industry declined and several European countries declared their willingness to reject it or phase it out (Austria, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland). Since the Tchernobyl disaster and the strengthening of anti-nuclear struggles, public opinion became much more critical of nuclear energy. Governments have to take into account this new awareness.

There are also other reasons for the present state of the nuclear industry. Historically, close cooperation between military establishments, private and public companies, governments and states motivated the very quick development of nuclear energy. This is particularly true in France. While

the production of nuclear electricity is still of relatively minor importance in the world, the ideological and economic framework has already changed, with the new neo liberal order. It is difficult to fully privatise the nuclear industry. It would aggravate security risks. Once the financial support of states is limited or stopped, the real costs of nuclear energy appears (because of the wastes, dismantling of plants, unfinished researches, etc.). Nuclear industry implies heavy investments in the long run, which is not in tune with the short-term vision of "the market" and the now so powerful stockholders, looking for quick money.

There are, therefore, strong reasons for the decline of the nuclear industry - both political and economic. This explains why a number of European countries where nuclear power is used have decided to progressively do without it. Nevertheless, even in these countries, no irreversible measures have yet been implemented. The very slow phasing out of nuclear power can still be stopped if the political and industrial climate were to change.

3. French pro-nuclear resistance

Like France, Belgium is heavily dependent on its nuclear energy; but it does not have the bomb. Like France also, Great Britain is a military nuclear power, but its nuclear industry is in the decline. Thus, France has become the number one nuclear power in the European Union, as far as both sectors - military and civil - are concerned. Some 80% of the electricity produced in our country is of nuclear origin. And France is, with the United States, the only country to engage researches on the next generations of (post) nuclear weapons.

Compared to other countries, the nuclear lobby in France is very powerful for very particular reasons. A rather homogeneous body of high-ranking managers and technocrats operates in the state administration, the public and private key companies, especially in the energy sector; it has been trained and moulded into the pro-nuclear ideology. In France, all the main political parties (right wing, SP) are pro-nuclear in the name of national independence, to maintain the rank of France as a (small) world power (this is the tradition and ambition incarnated by De Gaulle).

The French Communist Party itself is very much in favour of nuclear energy (even if, unlike the other main parties, it does not support the French nuclear bomb). This is due to old hopes and illusions - shared a while by many - in the role nuclear electricity could play in the fight against poverty. It is also due to the major role the French CP and the CGT trade-union confederation played, after World War II, in rebuilding the French energy sector.

Nowadays, France has become the stronghold of pro-nuclear resistance in West Europe, in spite of the fact that the Green Party (Les Verts) is part of the present Left government of Lionel Jospin (the Prime Minister from the Socialist Party). It was very clearly shown when Paris pressured the newly elected SPD-Green German government, for this government to moderate its (not so radical) anti-nuclear programme.

It is not impossible that French policies could change in the future. Public opinion is more and more dubious about nuclear energy: it is one of the many topics where the French National Assembly (90% pro-Nuke) does not reflect at all the political equilibrium in French public opinion. To survive economically, the French nuclear industry needs to export. But the world market for new nuclear plants is shrinking. Also, French industry was to develop its new nuclear EPR reactor in collaboration with the German industry, a perspective now in question with the present political evolution in Germany.

In France too, the future remains open. But for the time being, the French government goes on with

its pro-nuclear policies.

4. French anti-nuclear movement

The French anti-nuclear movement has been badly defeated after a decade of struggles in the 1970s. The fact that in the 1980s, Francis Mitterrand, the new Left president, buried the nuclear dossier in spite of his electoral engagements, proved a demoralising blow to the activists. The majority of the French labour movement is either pro-nuclear energy or mostly silent on the issue: this represents a lasting weakness for the anti-nuclear network and is quite difficult to overcome.

Nevertheless, after Tchernobyl, the anti-nuclear movement gained a new momentum. A national network has been built, bringing together hundreds of organisations: local committees, ecological associations, citizen movements, the Green Party and small radical Left parties like the LCR. Some links have been tied with anti-nuclear trade unionists in the energy sector. Massive campaigns of signatures proved successful and an in-depth grassroots work has been done, with the help of efficient publications.

Just after the election of the new Left government (with, for the first time, the participation of the Green Party in the Cabinet), the anti-nuclear movement scored significant victories, especially the decision to close down the Superphenix reactor (near Lyons in the east of France) and not to build a new plant in the west of France. But the movement was not able to impose on the government a radical and lasting change of policy in the energy sector. A number of decisions have been postponed, like the realisation of the EPR new reactor, and some promises were made (i.e., to make the nuclear sector more “transparent”), while the government maintained its pressure on a number of other fields, like the building of sites in which radioactive wastes could be deeply buried. We suffered a temporary defeat on this matter, in the northeastern part of France, but massive opposition to the building of such sites has grown in all parts of the country.

5. New challenges

The nuclear lobby has changed its ideological discourse. Before, it claimed that nuclear energy would be THE answer to poverty alleviation, offering an almost free and unlimited source of electricity. Nobody trusts this fairy tale any longer.

Now, the nuclear lobby explains that nuclear energy must stay during the coming century as one of the major sources of energy because it is “clean” (it does not produce CO₂ affecting the climate) and because the third world will need a lot of energy for its future development. Thus, the French nuclear lobby presents itself as “ecologist” and sensitive to the needs of the people from the third world.

It is of course clear that an industry, which massively creates radioactivity, can hardly be called “clean” and “ecological” (by the way, it also produces some amount of CO₂ in the mines and when transporting radioactive materials). And the model of development the nuclear lobby refers to be very “classical”, meaning it is not sustainable on the world scale and it also perpetuates the international relations of domination generated by the developed capitalist countries.

But, to be more efficient in the coming years, we need to link better the specific fight we pursue in France against nuclear energy with some other and broader issues.

* We have to address the issue of energy in a more global way: transport and electricity, oil and

nuclear. Neither CO₂ nor radioactivity! Progress has been made here, with the elaboration of alternative energy policies, the recent protest campaign after the 1998 maritime oil disaster in the west of France, etc. But it means that we have to confront simultaneously two major lobbies in France, the nuclear and the oil (with a company like Elf-Total which has old links with the darkest side of the French state and the French interventions in Africa, and also in Burma). This is a big task! Ultimately, the question of the model of development (and of the North-South solidarity) will have to be dealt with again.

* The links between the ecological and the social fields and needs have to be elaborated better. As recent reactions in France to the rise of gasoline prices have shown, if ecological reforms are increasing social inequality, they will fail. It is then very important to effectively combine the ecological demands with the social demands against inequalities struggles.

There is one important specific aspect, in France, to this general truth. In the name of free trade, the WTO and European treaties, an offensive is presently launched to dismantle the public service sector and to liberalise (privatise) it. The powerful pro-nuclear wing of the labour movement in the energy sector identifies its defence of nuclear electricity with the defence of the French tradition of public service. The two questions are of course not necessarily related, but we have to show clearly that our anti-nuclear fight will not prove to be a Trojan horse used (even if against our will) by neo liberal forces.

* The struggles have to move to the European level. Some progress has been made here too, with a closer collaboration with our German comrades. Some associations are operating in the European level. But common campaigns and mobilisations should be launched in the EU as a whole, which is not yet the case.

I have been working in the European Parliament for a year only, and I still have much to learn about the bizarre world of the European institutions. But one small parliamentary experience, done together with the French MEP Roseline Vachetta, who is also presently in Seoul at the People's Forum, was interesting. It has shown that, among other targets, we could move against the Euratom Treaty. This treaty was drafted 40 years ago to promote the nuclear industry. The main task confronting Europe today is the dismantling of old plants and the management of wastes left by the industry. We obviously have to get rid of the Euratom Treaty!

* There are two different networks in France, one against nuclear weapons (Abolition 2000) and one against nuclear energy (Sortir du nucléaire). This is partially due to the fact that a number of forces (linked to the CP) opposed the bomb but did not oppose the nuclear energy. But historically, the two fields are intertwined.

In the past, the military establishment favoured and shaped the development of the civilian nuclear sector. Nowadays, the spread of the nuclear energy industry contributes to the international proliferation of nuclear weapons.

With the end of the Cold War, nuclear disarmament became a political possibility. Steps were done in that direction. But the main nuclear powers (including France) asked all others states to renounce the Bomb forever, while refusing to abandon it themselves. They wanted to protect their monopoly over the nuclear fire. As a consequence, a new wave of nuclear proliferation occurred. This dynamics is very dangerous. But there is no middle way: either proliferation or total ban on nuclear weapons, including the ones of the official nuclear powers.

To fight against the nuclear industry is also one of the means to fight nuclear weapons.

6. Vital stakes

The nuclear issue is really a vital one. None of the deadly questions raised when the nuclear industry was launched, some 40 years ago, has been resolved: the interrelations with the military sector has changed but has not been cut off, there is no way yet to reduce the nuclear risk to an acceptable level, radioactivity cannot be destroyed or neutralised.

The Tchernobyl disaster tells us something about our future, if our fight does not win. This disaster was not mainly a "Soviet" problem, as French nucleocrats like to say. It is not primarily a technical problem. It shows what happens when a "nuclear country" (this time, the Soviet Union) enters in crisis - and so does its nuclear industry, civil and military. Other countries (including France) will one day or another enter in crisis too. One of the worst nuclear lies is to pretend that no social and political crisis will happen, and that the management of the nuclear industry or weaponry will continue smoothly for the centuries to come.

It is utterly irresponsible to build new nuclear plants the world over (this is the dream of the French industry), to pile up during a century more wastes on top of those already existing (which we do not know how to get rid of!), to perpetuate and increase the risk of a major nuclear accident.

P.S.

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