

Germany kills nuclear power for next century

by Rainer Apel

When the “red-green” coalition of Social Democrats and Greens took power in Bonn at end of October 1998, one of the priority topics on their agenda was the drop-out from nuclear power technology, on the grounds of alleged safety and radiation dangers. The “transition toward solar energy” and other “alternative technologies,” has been proclaimed a political priority.

Environmental Affairs Minister Jürgen Trittin, who belongs to the radical wing of the Green party, is terrifying the nuclear industry with provocative statements. First, he threatened the industry with a deadline of one year, by the end of which they should either have agreed voluntarily on a timetable for an accelerated shut down of nuclear technology, or face penalties from the government, which would then pass an anti-nuclear law. Then, he dismissed two expert commissions on nuclear safety at his ministry, announcing that he would replace them with pro-ecologist “experts.” He also announced that he would ban the transport of nuclear waste. This would paralyze the entire nuclear power sector, because there is no reprocessing facility in Germany, so nuclear waste has to be transported to either France or Britain by rail over hundreds of kilometers. These shipments, which are often interrupted by ecologists who blockade the tracks, are a vulnerable flank of Germany’s nuclear technology sector. Trittin also made headlines with statements to the effect that the first nuclear power plants should be taken off the grid, as early as this year.

It was only when Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (Social Democrat) intervened, in mid-December, placing the nuclear power issue under his personal supervision, that the wave of protests against Trittin from among industry and energy experts, and particularly the employees of the 19 nuclear power plants, subsided somewhat. Schröder said he wants “consensus, rather than conflicts” on the issue, but at the same time he reiterated that his main orientation would favor the drop-out from nuclear power. The first round of “consensus” talks has been set for the end of January.

Schröder’s Economics Minister, Werner Müller, has said that he considers “managing of a ‘soft drop-out’ from nuclear power” to be his main job in the government. Unlike Trittin, Müller prefers a ten-year transition — what he calls the “soft drop-out.” For the 40,000 employees in the nuclear industry, and another 120,000 in the supply industries, that “soft”

alternative implies that they will have a little time to look for a new job, by the year 2010 at the latest. And as the general trend goes, it is not at all certain that they will be able to get a job in one of the non-nuclear power plants, which the government is advertising to sell the unions on the policy.

Cheap imports

As Alwin Fitting, chairman of the factory council at RWE, a leading nuclear producer in Germany, told this author on Jan. 13, politicians and industry alike would rather avoid the costs of building new power plants, by importing cheap electricity from Germany’s neighbors: from nuclear plants in France, from conventional plants in eastern Europe, or from nuclear plants in Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus. This policy is endorsed by the energy sector “liberalization,” which the European Union is committed to implementing over the next few years.

Under the slogan of an alleged “fight against discriminatory practices in Europe,” this policy pushes the “Europeanization” of electricity supplies, to make sure that wherever electricity is needed, the contract goes to the producer that offers the lowest price. The temptation is high for the budget-balancing experts in governments and industrial corporations, to opt for the “cheap” solution: not building new plants, but exploiting capacities that exist somewhere abroad. As Fitting, who is also a factory council leader at the Biblis nuclear power plant, suspects, the “soft” drop-out from nuclear technology means the end of a national power sector in Germany. The majority of the 40,000 employees of the nuclear industry and the 19 power plants will have to look for jobs outside the power sector, Fitting fears. Other experts forecast that nuclear specialists will emigrate, to China, South Africa, India, or wherever a government is still committed to conducting nuclear research and building nuclear plants.

Hubertus Schmoldt, chairman of the public sector workers’ union, has warned that entering a non-nuclear era will mean that 250,000 jobs in the power sector will be thrown into uncertainty. Adding in the jobs in the supply industries, close to 1 million jobs are threatened.

A particularly disgusting aspect in the ongoing energy debate is the duplicitousness shown by the alleged “friends of nuclear technology.” Economics Minister Müller is one of these, telling industry and labor privately that he is for nuclear technology, but that “as a cabinet minister” he feels obliged to carry out the “no-nuclear” policy. He says that he thinks the “vast majority of the population reject nuclear power,” so that even if the technology were desirable from an expert standpoint, it were “not realizable for political reasons.”

This kind of thinking has forced industry and labor into a 20-year retreat from nuclear technology. If this pattern is not turned around — for example, by labor protests — Germany has entered the end-phase of its nuclear era.