

Oil Gets Germans To Rediscover Nuclear Power

by Rainer Apel

The shock at the drastic increase of crude oil and gasoline prices over the last few weeks, and the uncertainty over the future safety and affordability of fuel supplies, have caused two political responses in Germany: on the one hand, the immoral announcement by the ecologists that high oil prices were good for the development of “alternate” energy sources like water, wind, solar, and biogas; on the other, new initiatives to revive nuclear power technology, as a real alternative to fossil fuels.

The first was featured heavily at the World Renewables Summit on “alternate energies,” held in Bonn throughout the first week of June, with the official sponsorship of the Red-Green German government. The summit resulted in proposals for wind, solar and biogas “alternatives” to future oil-supply crises; making things worse, the German government announced a special, lowered-interest credit line of about 500 million euros from the state-run Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau for the development of such “alternate” technologies.

The moral side was featured in initiatives like a memorandum of the Bavarian state government, urging the reversal of the exit-from-nuclear agreements signed between the industry and the Red-Green government in 2002. The Bavarian memorandum, publicized as the aforesaid Renewables Summit began, states that against the background of increasing uncertainties for the future oil supply, nuclear power must be revitalized, so that Germany can build nuclear power plants again. In 20 years, no new nuclear power plant has been built in Germany, and the foul deals signed between the government and the industry two years ago made a final exit from nuclear technology over the next 20 years official policy.

The Bavarian initiative received support from Hesse, when State Governor Roland Koch called for new power plant construction, in an interview on June 9. The irrationality of the nuclear exit had to be reversed, Koch said, and nuclear technology should be seen as an alternative to the uncertain fossil fuels on which the country’s energy supply depends today. Katherina Reiche, another prominent Christian Democrat like Koch, pointed out that the Red-Green exit policy had already done severe damage to nuclear science in Germany. Whereas in 1976, university diplomas still went to 216 nuclear engineers, there were only 15 in 2003. Whoever is courageous enough among German youth to show interest in nuclear technology, must emigrate to other countries like France, China, or Brazil, where university studies in this sec-

tor are still available at a scope worth mentioning. And Germany’s nuclear power industry has repeatedly warned that in any emergency in their sector, they would have to request specialists from abroad to help the Germans, who do not have a reserve of such specialists anymore. Germany was hardly even able to handle the Red-Green exit in a responsible and safe way, with its own engineers.

France Is Resuming Nuclear

The German power sector says that by 2020, five new nuclear power reactors will definitely have to be built—just to replace those older reactors that have to be shut down and replaced by then.

The Bavarian initiative is said to be closely linked to the new French government’s push for a revitalization of nuclear reactor projects in France and Europe. Government and parliament, just a few weeks ago, voted up a bill that grants the permit for at least one new nuclear power complex with a capacity of 1,600 megawatts. A timetable has not been decided, but if built, it would be a reactor of the EPR (Enhanced Pressurized Water Reactor) type, a modernized fission technology developed as a joint project by the two leading nuclear power technology producers of France and Germany, AR-EVA (formerly Framatome) and Siemens. A contract for the construction of such a reactor by 2007—the first contract of this kind in Europe—was signed already two months ago between France and Finland.

Similar momentum for nuclear power in several eastern European countries is related to Russian offers for cooperation: Czechia and Slovakia have announced plans to build two plants each, Bulgaria wants a new complex, and there is interest also in Hungary and Croatia.

Whereas these are all traditional fission-technology projects, Russia and France are pushing for cooperation in thermonuclear fusion, and have backing also by Germany in the planned ITER (international thermonuclear experimental reactor) project. The French have offered their long-time nuclear power complex at Cadarache as the site of the envisaged ITER, but a decision has repeatedly been postponed, because another group of nations, led by the United States, has so far favored a site in Japan.

Russia is also proposing the development of fast breeder reactor types, as a more efficient source of nuclear power than the standard fission reactors. To an extent, the Russians can build on the experience of the Germans, who also pursued the breeder technology during the late 1960s and 1970s, and were pioneers on the breeder front but abandoned it under the impact of the spreading ecologist ideology in the 1980s. As in the cases of China, South Korea, and South Africa, where breeder technology is promoted, the Russians can also be expected to develop a system in the coming years.

In comparison, the revised public debate in Germany is a cautious step; but hopefully the dominant ecologist ideology can be drive back, to open the door for atoms again.