Britain and US revive nuclear energy policy

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7 November 2001

The Blair government has approved production of the highly controversial mixed oxide (MOX) nuclear fuel by British Nuclear Fuels (BNFL). The October 3 decision means MOX, made from reprocessed nuclear waste at the Sellafield re-processing complex in Cumbria, North West England, can also be re-exported to countries who sent their reactor waste to Sellafield.

The British government sought to bury the MOX news under the blanket media war coverage. The decision ignores the well documented dangers and deep public concerns over MOX production and is a clear signal that Prime Minister Tony Blair, acting in the interests of leading British corporations, intends to follow the US government in authorising a new generation of nuclear power stations.

Days after President George W. Bush took office, the US government inaugurated a National Energy Policy Development Group, (NEPDG) chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney and including Secretary of State Colin Powell. The group's remit was to safeguard US energy sources in the foreseeable future, particularly during periods of increasing global pressure on energy supplies.

The eventual findings called for accelerated oil and gas exploration in Alaska and the Arctic, the removal of environmental and local regulatory controls, and a programme to expand *all* forms of power generation, and transmission. In addition to expanding oil production in North America, the NEPDG noted the importance of African, Caspian Sea and Kazakhstan oil fields to the US, and insisted that the government back corporate efforts to exploit all these areas.

Domestically, the NEPDG called for between 1,300 and 1,900 new US power stations to be built over the next 20 years—the equivalent of a new plant every 90 or so days. At the same time, 20 percent of US power currently produced by elderly nuclear stations is to be maintained. These objectives are to be achieved by extending the lifespan of existing plants, and licensing new ones, preferably at existing sites, where new facilities could be built without incurring too much public wrath. Although the NEPDG has given no overall number for future nuclear plant, tens, if not hundreds of new nuclear power stations would have to be built to meet the targets outlined. Of 437 nuclear plants worldwide there are currently 103 in the US.

Following the re-election of Labour in June 2001, the Blair government launched its own energy review, inviting submissions from energy and industrial concerns, trade unions, industry lobby groups and environmentalists.

Submissions to the incomplete review (available online at http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2001/energy/submissionshome.shtml) give a fascinating insight into how a complex of political calculations is resolving itself into support for the efforts of the big energy corporations to diversify their sources of supply, and simultaneously generating a fresh enthusiasm for nuclear power.

For example, arms manufacturer BAES, formerly British Aerospace, one of the world's largest arms companies, is calling for a broad-based energy policy that cannot be disrupted by particular sections of workers nor be strangled by the OPEC cartel of oil-producing nations.

BNFL hails the benefits of nuclear power, and points to the dangers of an over-reliance on gas as the predominant energy for power generation. Part of the previous Conservative government's strategy for attacking the British working class, and particularly coal miners, was a policy of building gas-fired power stations. This "dash for gas" relied on North Sea reserves or imported gas. BNFL point out that North Sea gas is all but exhausted, meaning that future British energy supplies will be reliant on the politically unstable Middle East, and Russia. The privatised nuclear generator British Energy (BE) and the still state-owned BNFL both emphasise that sources of raw uranium are reliable, with Canada and Australia being the major suppliers.

BNFL also stand to benefit from any new US construction. One of three main US-based producers of nuclear power plants is Westinghouse Electric, who built the Three Mile Island plant that suffered a near meltdown

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in 1979. This, along with the Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine, has contributed enormously to the global loss of confidence in nuclear power generation. Westinghouse, who designed 60 percent of US stations, was bought by BNFL two years ago. It has developed new, off-the-shelf, nuclear fission plants—the AP600 and AP1000—that it hopes to sell globally in large numbers. Westinghouse claims that the AP series is inherently safer than its predecessors, though environmental groups dispute this.

Both BNFL and BE have called for the "historic" costs of decommissioning older nuclear plants due to safety concerns to be passed on to tax-payers, while the companies are freed to develop their business. At present, BNFL is technically bankrupt, as the estimated £34 billion ($49 billion) cost of decommissioning its stations, with the radiation danger lasting for decades if not centuries, far outweighing the company's assets.

British Petroleum (BP), however, argues that, while concerns about the impact of industrial action are entirely justified, gas supplies from international sources can be relied upon, provided they are sufficiently diverse. Thus, although Russia is politically unstable, 70 percent of the world's gas resources lie within economic transportation distance of the European Union, and a new gas line should be built from Norway to the UK. BP, who have recently signed an agreement with Norwegian oil and gas company Statoil, are anxious to push forward "liberalisation" of the European gas market.

It is in this context that the MOX decision should be understood. It is a green light to the nuclear industry, indicating support for a new generation of nuclear power stations. One of the advantages claimed for MOX fuel is that it recycles plutonium waste that has been building up for decades at Sellafield. MOX can also be used in the AP1000. BNFL estimate that over the course of 20 years, an AP1000 facility would eventually consume much of the increasingly dangerous plutonium stockpile in Sellafield. More fundamentally, the MOX decision indicates that BNFL and British Energy can rely on support from both the US and UK governments in seeking to corner a large portion of the world market in new nuclear power orders that they hope declining and unstable fossil fuel supplies will generate.

The MOX decision has triggered considerable opposition on both sides of the Irish Sea. The Fianna Fail administration under Bertie Ahern in the Irish Republic, less than 150 miles away from Sellafield across the Irish Sea, intends to challenge the British decision under a UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which usually deals with shipping and fishing disputes. Dublin is already pursuing a case under the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR), which attempts to monitor and restrict marine pollution. Decades of waste discharges from Sellafield have made the Irish Sea one of the most radioactive stretches of water in the world, while numerous cancer clusters have been reported around the plant and on the coasts on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Irish deputies raised MOX in the European Parliament. They pointed to an as yet unpublished report that a serious accident or aircraft attack at Sellafield, like that on the World Trade Center, could cause "up to one million" deaths. A cabinet committee has been set up to prosecute a case through the European Court of Justice.

Stephen Tindale, Executive Director of Greenpeace in the UK, said of the October 3 decision: "Expanding the global trade in plutonium is dangerously irresponsible, especially at a time of huge global insecurity... the government here seems as ever hell-bent on supporting BNFL at any cost, even if that means plutonium shipments bobbing about like sitting ducks on the high seas."

The British government has significantly increased police and army powers in the vicinity of nuclear facilities. Home Secretary David Blunkett has authorised the special police department that deals exclusively with nuclear security to launch raids and searches of homes within a three-mile radius of nuclear plants. According to newspaper reports, RAF Tornado fighters were scrambled over Sellafield last weekend, while the French government has installed anti-aircraft missiles outside its La Hague reprocessing plant in North West France.

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