

A demonstration against the European Pressurized Reactor (EPR)

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The following account of a French anti-nuclear demonstration was sent by a WSWs reader in Nancy, France.

On Saturday March 17, a joint demonstration took place in Lyon with delegations from five cities (Lilles, Lyons, Rennes, Strasbourg and Toulouse) to protest against the next generation of nuclear power plants designed by Siemens and Framatome, named the EPR (European Pressurized Reactor, or Evolutionary Pressurized Reactor for the American market). Those present responded to an appeal made by the “Stop the EPR Collective”

The Lyon demonstration started out from Bellecour Square. Most of those present clearly displayed their affiliation to one or another of the organizing groups. The most numerous were the Greens, followed by the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR) and the anarchists of the CNT (National Labour Confederation). Smaller tendencies included a militant advocate of Esperanto and someone pleading for humanity to become totally vegetarian. Curious observers seeking to be informed about the nuclear industry were not very numerous either. Very few passers-by stopped to be informed, although some, especially the young, made a few sarcastic remarks.

It must be said that the spectacle with which they were presented was pretty lamentable.

Three speakers intervened for a few minutes before the demonstration got under way. All of them emphasized the doubtful methods with which the EDF (the state-controlled electricity company), AREVA (a private energy group) and the government have joined in promoting nuclear energy (slapdash studies, if any, as to the consequences or straight-out lies) as well as the weaknesses of the new EPR system (technology developed in 1992, which does not differ

fundamentally from the reactors of the 1950s, and the numerous technical difficulties encountered with this type of reactor during its construction in Finland).

However, the criticism was tailored entirely to fit within the nationalist framework of the debate put forward by the government. In attempting to reply point by point to the pro-nuclear arguments, the speakers were reduced to complaining that the uranium was imported and therefore did not guarantee the independence of French energy resources. They also explained that the number of French power stations was excessive since France exported a part of its production and that this export involved basic electricity (direct current produced in nuclear power stations), which is less expensive than peak period electricity (produced during peak periods of consumption by power stations able to start up and shut down rapidly), which must be imported. They saw this, above all, as a problem of the French trade deficit.

At the end of the speeches, the crowd was asked to participate in a “moral uprising against the EPR and for democracy” This involved crouching on the ground and springing into the air the moment when young girls disguised as “Marianne” (the symbol of the French Republic), with their Phrygian caps and official stickers, passed by holding little windmills.

Another point that was stressed by the speakers related to “the opportunity” offered by the presidential elections to put pressure on leaders so that they may reconsider their attitude toward nuclear energy. The “Stop the EPR Collective” had printed 600,000 “No to the EPR” slips, with the idea that each voter send one to the candidate of their choice who had not yet taken a position against the EPR: Buffet of the Communist Party; Le Pen of the National Front; Royal of the Socialist Party; Bayrou of the centre-right UDF; Laguiller of LO (Workers Struggle); and Sarkozy of the

UMP, a right-wing Gaullist party. The slips indicated that the individual would not vote for the candidate unless he or she opposed the new plants.

At no time, either in the speeches or in the leaflets of the different groups, was the issue raised of placing energy production in the hands of a European public utility under the control of workers (who are the first to be concerned about the safety of these installations).

In their leaflets, all these groups blame “Western overconsumption” For the anarchists, the perspective “for 2050 is a population estimated at 9 billion individuals!”—something which seems terrible to them and justifies campaigning for the refusal to bear children.

The Greens explain that with the same sum as that invested in the EPR (€3.3 billion), one could produce as much power from renewable energy sources “and create 15 times more jobs” This argument in part echoes that of the Luddites at the beginning of the nineteenth century, who smashed the machines because it “took away their work”

Being incapable of distinguishing between technological progress and its capitalist free-market framework, all these groups formulate reactionary demands such as the immediate abandoning of nuclear energy, the end of high tension electric cables (and therefore the transfer of energy over long distances), and the halting of research into the ITER nuclear fusion program at Cadarache.

By mixing up these arguments with the legitimate claims for every citizen to be informed and consulted about such important choices, and not offering any serious perspective to arrive at this goal, these groups only add to the confusion.

The demonstration marched off in good humour, which contrasted with the indifference of most passers-by.



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