

Protests in Germany against radioactive waste transport

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Large numbers of anti-nuclear activists have turned out during the past five days to protest against the transport through France and Germany of radioactive waste, so-called Castor transports (Cask for Storage and Transport of Radioactive Material, or highly radioactive waste containers).

The large number of protesters—many more than in recent years—is an indication of growing opposition to the nuclear policy of the German government led by Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU).

Every year trains pulling special Castor containers full of highly radioactive waste pass through Germany. This time, however, tens of thousands of anti-nuclear activists have intervened to block the passage of the train with its 123 tons of radioactive waste. State governments have mobilized nearly 17,000 policemen to protect the route of the train, which began its journey at the French reprocessing plant in La Hague to travel to its final destination, the temporary underground storage facilities at Gorleben in the German state of Lower Saxony.

In the German rural region of Wendland, farmers blocked the route with their tractors and anti-nuclear activists carried out sit-down blockades. Some protesters chained themselves to the tracks; others tried repeatedly to gain access to the railway lines in order to remove stones from the track bed. On Sunday morning an estimated 2,500-3,000 anti-nuclear activists sought to reach the tracks to disrupt the route of the train. According to police sources, around 250 reached the railway lines and attempted to remove stones.

The police retaliated against the demonstrators on Sunday with water cannon, clubs, pepper spray and teargas, resulting in many injuries. Demonstrators then set alight an armored police vehicle in a nearby forest.

The citizens' initiative Environmental Protection Lüchow Dannenberg (BI) reported sighting an army tank and the federal Interior Ministry confirmed that the authorities in Lower Saxony had requested that German army technical equipment be made available to the police. Official state sources denied that soldiers were involved in the police action, a deployment that would constitute a violation of the German constitution forbidding the domestic use of the army.

As a result of the protests the Castor containers were

transferred onto trucks for the last 20 kilometers to Gorleben. Sitdown blockades by several thousand persons have delayed the transport, which was due to arrive in Gorleben on Tuesday morning.

The BI Lüchow Dannenberg had called upon demonstrators and police to refrain from violence and remain peaceful. According to BI-spokesman Wolfgang Ehmke on Sunday in Dannenberg: "We do not want violence but rather a debate about withdrawing from the use nuclear power and we appeal to the police not to use force." The aim of the protesters is to delay "the arrival of the Castor transport and at the same time disrupt the timetable for the government's nuclear policy", he said.

The nuclear policy of the government—a coalition of conservative parties (CDU/CSU) with the free-market Free Democratic Party (FDP)—has led to a revival of protests against the Castor transports and its nuclear policy. The coalition's recent decision in favor of an unlimited extension for the running of nuclear power plants in Germany had only served to fuel protests. It is evident that the driving force behind the government's decision is to guarantee the profits of the big energy concerns, which operate the nuclear power plants. No consideration has been given to the dangers to the public at large arising from the aging and increasingly run-down power plants, combined with the risks involved in transporting and storing huge amounts of radioactive material.

Two other temporary storage facilities in Morsleben and Asse are regarded today as highly unsafe and the government seems intent on securing the underground facilities in Gorleben as the final destination for radioactive waste.

It is now known that in 1983 the government of former chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU) exercised considerable pressure on scientists exploring the possibilities of storage at Gorleben to suppress the results of their research, which argued against storing waste in the salt deposits at the site. The decision in favor of Gorleben, situated directly on the border with the former East Germany, was politically motivated. The investigation of other suitable locations in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg had already been prevented by local CDU/CSU state politicians.

Despite this, the state secretary in the Federal Environment

Ministry, Katherina Riech (CDU), declared on November 5 that the radioactive waste dump in Gorleben was safe and would continue to be examined as a final waste disposal site.

Germany is not the only country that lacks any proper regulation for the disposal of radioactive waste. In the European Union, 14 different nations operate about 140 nuclear power stations across the continent, and the total number of such plants stands at over 400 worldwide. Not a single country possesses a final waste disposal site.

The party seeking to profit from the latest protests is the Greens, despite the fact that 10 years earlier the current Green chairperson, Claudia Roth, and the former Green Environment Secretary, Jürgen Trittin, had been accused and attacked by demonstrators in exactly the same region as “traitors”.

At the beginning of 1998 Angela Merkel, now chancellor, then environment secretary in the government of Helmut Kohl, stopped the Castor transports after tests revealed dangerous levels of radiation in the containers. Less than two years later, the successor coalition of the Social Democratic Party and the Greens (1998-2005) lifted the ban on transports as part of their alleged program to “withdraw from nuclear power.” In reality, this “withdrawal” has turned out to be nothing less than a guarantee that existing nuclear power plants can continue to run for several decades.

The resumption of Castor transports by the nuclear power plant operators at the beginning of 2001 led once again to large protests. At the time the Greens condemned the protests and were jointly responsible for the huge police operation against demonstrators.

One year later the deal struck between the Green-led Environment Ministry and power station operators led to an abatement of the protests against Castor transports and the government’s nuclear power in the years following. Following the latest decision by the Merkel government to extend the running times of nuclear plants the Greens are now striking oppositional poses and attempting to exploit the protests for their own purposes.

The joint chairpersons of the party, Claudia Roth and Cem Özdemir, came to discuss with the organizers of the latest protests as if nothing had happened during the last 10 years. The head of the Green Party Bundestag faction, Renate Künast, called off her appearance at the protests in favor of a party meeting in Berlin where she announced she would be standing against the SPD mayor in next year’s state elections. She declared that, if elected the new mayor of Berlin, she would demonstrate against the nuclear waste transports.

In recent months the electoral ratings for the German Green Party have risen to more than 20 percent, according to recent opinion polls. In Berlin and in Baden-Württemberg, where protests are taking place against the Stuttgart 2011 building project, the Greens have actually overtaken the SPD.

This phenomenon is above all bound up with the growing crisis in broad layers of the middle class. During the post-war

period Germany’s two main so-called people’s parties—the SPD and the CDU/CSU—relied on these layers. Now these same layers are being hit by spending cuts and layoffs in public service combined with declining prospects for university graduates. They are angry with the billions in taxpayers’ money handed out to the banks and are increasingly alienated from the major parties, which function openly as servants of the banks and big business.

Green Party leaders have recently sought to stress their differences with the current policy of the coalition government and declared their unwillingness to collaborate with it. Last Sunday Özdemir told the *Bild am Sonntag* newspaper, there would be “no black-green option” and the coalition had removed the option from the table. The CDU and CSU are seeking to radicalize “old party camps” with their nuclear policy. Özdemir also attacked the CDU in Baden-Württemberg, declaring that “‘Stuttgart 21’ has nothing to do with our political priorities.”

This stance is completely hypocritical. In Berlin, Renate Künast explained that if she were mayor of Berlin she was ready to demonstrate against the Castor transports, but in her speech did not rule out a coalition with the CDU. The Greens are ready to unite with anybody.

Should Merkel’s CDU suffer a major defeat at the key state election due in Baden-Württemberg next March, the Greens will be on hand to carry on the chancellor’s policies in a coalition, either with the conservative camp or the SPD. As they did 10 years ago, the Greens in power would then turn decisively against those in Wendland who are now celebrating the Greens “return to the fold”.

As social and political tensions intensify the Greens regard their major task to be the restoration of confidence in the government and state apparatus and above all to prevent any unity between the middle classes and the working class. They vehemently defend the profit system and are prepared to do so with the full force of the state.



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