

German chancellor does about-face on nuclear policy

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The German government has responded to the nuclear disaster in Japan by doing a panicky about-face in its nuclear policy. The main concern of German Chancellor Angela Merkel is to drum up support for her ailing party in important state elections that will take place over the next two weekends.

On Monday, Chancellor Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and her deputy, Guido Westerwelle of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), announced to the press a three-month moratorium on an extension of the lifespan of nuclear plants in Germany. Then, following a meeting with state premiers on Tuesday, Merkel announced that the seven German nuclear plants built prior to 1980 would be immediately shut down for three months.

This maneuver will hardly fool anyone acquainted with the government's previous energy policy. In common with Japan, the German government has systematically subordinated the well-being and security of the population to the powerful nuclear lobby and the profit interests of major energy companies.

Last autumn, the CDU-led coalition government passed the new energy plan that is now to be suspended for three months. The plan involved extending the life of existing nuclear power plants between 8 and 14 years, thereby guaranteeing energy companies billions of euros in additional profits. The measure by the Merkel government revoked the so-called nuclear consensus on phasing out nuclear energy agreed by the former SPD-Green coalition with energy companies in 2000.

The 2000 consensus made considerable concessions to nuclear power companies. It granted existing plants an

unexpectedly long running time, averaging 32 years, and guaranteed them additional billions in profits. Since then the Greens, who once opposed nuclear energy, have worked to insure the ability of the energy companies to operate their nuclear reactors undisturbed. The Green Party was instrumental in stifling militant protests against the shipping of nuclear waste to a depository at Gorleben.

The decision by Merkel to extend the life span of nuclear plants beyond the dates agreed in the nuclear consensus represented another major concession to the nuclear lobby. In arriving at its decision, her government ignored all the warnings of a potential breakdown of aging reactors.

Now she is junking her arguments of yesterday. Merkel justified the moratorium as follows: "The events in Japan have taught us that risks which we regarded as highly improbable can materialise." Everything had to be put to the test, she continued, and the three months would be used to check the safety of all nuclear power plants.

In fact, experts have long warned of such dangers, pointing out that so-called residual risk is not a negligible statistic, but in the event of a disaster could cost millions of lives.

There has been no shortage of precedents. In the summer of 2006, for example, the cooling systems at the Forsmark nuclear power plant in Sweden failed. The plant was just seven minutes from a complete meltdown. The energy company Vattenfall, which also operates a number of nuclear plants in Germany, tried to cover up the incident and play down what had taken place—with limited success. The incident showed that a disaster could arise simply from the failure of emergency generators and did not require a spectacular natural event, such as that which

has taken place in Japan.

When Merkel suddenly raises the principle “security first,” it is mainly with an eye to upcoming state elections. This Sunday an election will be held in the state of Saxony-Anhalt and one week later elections are due in Rhineland-Palatinate and Baden-Württemberg.

The extension on nuclear plants decided last autumn now hangs like a millstone around the neck of the ruling coalition. The events in Japan have made clear to broad layers the dangers of a nuclear catastrophe in densely populated areas.

In the state of Baden-Württemberg, which the CDU has governed since 1953, Premier Stefan Mappus is believed to have little chance in next week’s election. Last Saturday, more than 60,000 protesters turned out for an anti-nuclear demonstration in Stuttgart. The demonstration had been scheduled long before, but after the disaster in Japan the turnout was much higher than anticipated. Stuttgart is the biggest city in Baden-Württemberg, and public opinion is increasingly turning against Mappus, who is one of the most aggressive proponents of nuclear energy in the CDU.

The events in Japan are having a major impact on public opinion in Germany. Millions have been following the live media reports dealing with the unfolding catastrophe at the nuclear plant in Fukushima. The owners of the plant have virtually lost control over four reactors and many experts suspect that a core meltdown has already begun in three of them.

The measures taken by engineers on site to contain the disaster are an expression of the prevailing desperation. They are currently trying to cool the reactors with sea water—an improvised emergency measure that has no precedent.

A meltdown occurs when the nuclear fuel continues to heat up due to insufficient cooling. At 900 degrees Celsius, the metal tubes surrounding the uranium begin to crumble. At 2,850 degrees the uranium itself starts to melt. Between these two phases, chemical processes take place giving rise to highly explosive amounts of hydrogen.

No reactor containment vessel is capable of

withstanding the heat of a complete meltdown. The alternatives are either an explosion—as was the case in the Chernobyl disaster—or the liquid mass slowly eating its way through the soil. Even an uncontrolled nuclear explosion cannot be ruled out.

Either a meltdown or an explosion would release huge amounts of highly radioactive material which, depending on weather conditions, could spread over long distances and contaminate whole regions for decades. A worst case scenario would be a meltdown of reactor 3, which uses highly toxic plutonium. That would threaten the lives and health of tens of millions of people not only in Japan—35 million people live in greater Tokyo alone—but also in Korea, China and Russia.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), radiation levels at the power plant have reached 400 mSv per hour, i.e., 400 times greater than the permitted limit for an entire year. These levels alone are sufficient to cause radiation sickness within a short space of time.

In view of these dramatic events it is unlikely that many people will be convinced by Merkel’s political maneuver. In the event of a debacle for the CDU in the upcoming state elections, the likely beneficiaries will be the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens. But both of these parties are just as firmly in the grip of the nuclear lobby.

Gerhard Schröder (SPD) and Joschka Fischer (the Greens), the chancellor and vice chancellor of the former SPD-Green coalition, both work as lobbyists for the energy industry. Schröder heads the Nord Stream pipeline, while Fischer is a leading consultant for the Nabucco pipeline.



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