

Letters on nuclear power, private ownership and the profit system

26 March 2011

Following is a selection of letters from readers on the March 24 perspective by Patrick O'Connor, "Nuclear power, private ownership and the profit system."

This article is the only piece of commentary I have read that identifies the key lesson to be learnt from the continuing events at the Fukushima power station.

I'm a physicist working in publicly funded scientific research, unconnected to the nuclear industry.

I am pro-nuclear energy for what I consider to be the most logical reason. The energy density of the uranium fission process is five orders of magnitude larger than chemical combustion. All else follows from this; five orders of magnitude less fuel is needed per kWh and five orders of magnitude less waste is produced. This does not mean nuclear energy is risk free, just that the problems are five orders of magnitude smaller than fossil fuel use.

As you say, "The problem is not nuclear power per se, but the social and economic order under which it is developed". This is the real issue, and one that has plagued nuclear energy since its discovery in the 1930s.

Why do we use the Uranium-Plutonium fuel cycle and not the Thorium-Uranium fuel cycle? Because Th-U has no weapons-grade byproducts, and the field matured in the context of a World War. Therefore the nuclear power industry developed off the back of an extremely well funded military programme. Had the secrets of the atomic nucleus been discovered in peacetime, this history could very well be different.

Why does most of the world use PWR and BWR reactors? Because this was the best engineering

solution for US Navy submarines.

What is needed today is a root and branch re-examination of the best form of nuclear power stations for mass, civilian energy generation, taking into account these particular societal constraints. Not merely adapting pre-existing technologies developed for military applications.

There are many promising nuclear technologies that have the potential to deliver carbon-free generation capacity. This requires a sober examination of each's characteristics and dispassionate research.

The profit motive works against this.

Returning to Fukushima, the situation is still developing, workers are selflessly taking personal risk to avert releases of materials and should be praised for this. However, there is gathering evidence of TEPCO and government hesitation to safely and quickly cool the reactors, lest they be unrecoverable.

Once again, we see the benefits of a technology being compromised by the profit motive.

Peter W
UK
24 March 2011

Mr. O'Connor's perspective on nuclear power is very much welcome as a contrast to the petty bourgeois hand-wringing of such outfits as the ISO, which calls in an article on the Socialist Worker web site entitled "The Risks of Nuclear Roulette" for a "reinvigorated anti-nuclear movement" where "anti-nuclear activists

and socialists” work together on the basis of the slogan “Nuclear power—no thanks!” (!)

Mr. O’Connor is right to see the potential of nuclear power in a socialist society. The ecological movement is wedded to the social conditions of capitalism and the quest of privileged individuals (as individuals) or individual companies/institutions/municipalities to appear to “reduce their ecological footprint” by way of—in this context—the totally decorative installation of “sensible...energy sources such as wind turbines and solar panels” in the words of the Socialist Worker, along with other useless upper-class status symbols like the expensive hybrid car. The ecological movement and its sustainers in the petty bourgeois left are incapable of envisioning a society that approaches environmental and energy problems as a society based on rational and systematic planning. So they can only say, to quote the Socialist Worker article again: “the catastrophe in Japan underlines the argument that anti-nuclear campaigners and socialists have made since the inception of nuclear power: There is no such thing as a safe nuclear plant.”

Terrence M
Massachusetts, USA
24 March 2011

Depending upon which side of the international chessboard one is observing the sordid action, an unmitigated disaster with hideous ramifications may just be a minor inconvenience and barely worth a mention.

Richard C
24 March 2011



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