

California's San Onofre nuclear plant to shut down permanently

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On Friday, Southern California Edison (SCE) announced that the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS), located on the Pacific coast in San Clemente, between Los Angeles and San Diego, will be shut down permanently after 16 months of being inoperative due to safety concerns relating to a radioactive steam leakage in its two remaining reactors.

The leak of radioactive steam, detected in January 2012, came from a new steam generator system installed between 2010 and 2011 to extend the life of the plant, the tubes of which were deteriorating at an abnormal rate. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “The project cost Edison and San Diego Gas & Electric—the plant’s minority owner—a combined \$768.5 million, passed on to ratepayers.”

Nestled between two of America’s most densely populated counties—Los Angeles and San Diego, with populations of 9.9 million and 3.1 million, respectively—the decision to shut down the SONGS highlights the dangers and irrationality behind the private ownership of energy production, particularly nuclear energy. As with the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011, the largest since the 1986 Chernobyl explosion, the incessant drive for profit takes priority over the safety and needs of the population.

With the planned decommissioning of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station, California will now be home to only one nuclear power station, Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) Corp.’s Diablo Canyon Power Plant, located in San Luis Obispo County near the tectonically active San Andreas fault.

The history of the SONGS is one littered with controversy and negligence. The plant is primarily owned by Southern California Edison, which owns 78.2 percent and controls operations at the facility. San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) owns 20 percent, while the City of Riverside Utilities Department owns the remaining 1.8

percent—the latter being the only public agency.

Construction began on the nuclear facility in August 1964, with the first reactor (Unit 1) being commissioned on January 1, 1968. Units 2 and 3 were later commissioned on August 8, 1983, and April 1, 1984, respectively. In 1977, during the construction of Units 2 and 3, Bechtel, the company who designed the plant, installed one of the nuclear reactor vessels backwards. Unit 1 was later decommissioned on November 30, 1992, over fears that it would not be able to withstand a large earthquake.

The plant is situated in an extremely tectonically active area of the planet. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) has given a 60 percent probability of a “major” earthquake (above a 6.7 magnitude) occurring in Southern California within the next 30 years. The SONGS was only designed to withstand a 7.0 magnitude earthquake, but sits near fault lines capable of magnitudes in excess of 8.0—exponentially larger than a 7.0 magnitude earthquake.

Between 2001 and 2006, the SONGS was investigated by the US Nuclear Regulatory Agency (NRC) for falsifying the records of routine fire checks at the facility. Despite admitting guilt, SCE was not penalized by the NRC, but rather, told to implement plant safety programs.

In 2007, SCE was again cited for systematically falsifying its records at the SONGS facility. The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) found that SCE management had its employees “skew” the results of customer surveys in order to boost the former’s bonus packages.

In 2011, as reported by the *San Diego Union Tribune*, the NRC expressed concerns that there still loomed a dangerous culture within the plant, namely “that workers are afraid they will be retaliated against if they bring up safety problems, something that’s against the rules.”

Despite continuous violations, which could have resulted in a massive loss of life and an environmental

disaster, SCE was simply given a slap on the wrist by the various government agencies tasked with overseeing its operations at SONGS.

The shutdown of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station will not only lead to additional rate increases for the millions of residents in the surrounding areas, which will impose a financial burden on working families already struggling throughout the state, but also mass layoffs. Prior to the 2012 radioactive steam leakage, the SONGS employed approximately 2,300 workers. In early 2013, SCE began laying off hundreds of workers to cut costs. By the time of Friday's announcement, the SONGS had reduced its workforce to 1,500.

Costs for decommissioning the plant are expected to exceed \$3 billion. Southern California Edison has stated that it has \$2.7 billion in its decommission fund; however, Ted Craver, CEO of Edison International (SCE's parent company), indicated that in order to cover the remaining costs, another 1,100 workers would need to be laid off—leaving only 400 to oversee the decommissioning process. In 2012 Edison International was ranked 211th in Forbes' Fortune 500 listings, with assets above \$45 billion.

As was the case with the disasters of Three Mile Island in 1979 and Fukushima in 2011—both of which have never received a full and impartial investigation—the shutdown of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station provides yet another example of the immense dangers behind the production of nuclear energy in the hands of private corporations whose primary concern is profit, not social need or environmental and human safety. The issue is not one of rejecting the science behind nuclear energy, as various environmental groups insist, but rather of freeing this technology and its potential from the grip of the capitalist system.



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