

# German government drops plans for immediate shutdown of nuclear power

by Rainer Apel

On Jan. 25, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder announced that his government's intent to begin implementation of its stated policy of eliminating use of nuclear technology, with a ban on reprocessing of spent fuels as of January 2000, has been dropped. The content of the announcement was elaborated the next day, at a meeting of the nuclear power roundtable of industry, labor, and government representatives in Bonn: There will be no target date for a general ban on nuclear energy use, but individual timetables for the shutdown of each of the 19 nuclear plants, which together provide 34% of Germany's electrical power, will be negotiated in tripartite working groups assigned for each of the plants. Under the plan, industry will be given several years of breathing room to come up with alternatives: first, to reprocessing and the transport by rail of nuclear waste, and second, to reliance on nuclear energy altogether. Details of how this would work, will be defined at another big roundtable session in mid-March.

This compromise is a severe setback to the radical currents of the "red-green" government and to the ecologist movement, which insist that the withdrawal from nuclear technology begin on Jan. 1, 2000. The Green party, the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) government coalition partner, did not like it, but they chose to swallow the concession. This retreat on the part of the government, and particularly, Environmental Affairs Minister Jürgen Trittin (Green party), the frontman for the anti-nuclear radicals, was brought about by the combination of the strong resistance from labor, which threatened utility strikes, and from the nuclear industry and several state governments, which threatened legal action against the government. And, ironically, the British government, whose Labour majority has a green agenda, was one of the leading catalysts in the Jan. 25 decision by Chancellor Schröder to invoke his "Chancellor's guideline privilege" and overrule his coalition partner.

## The British hard line

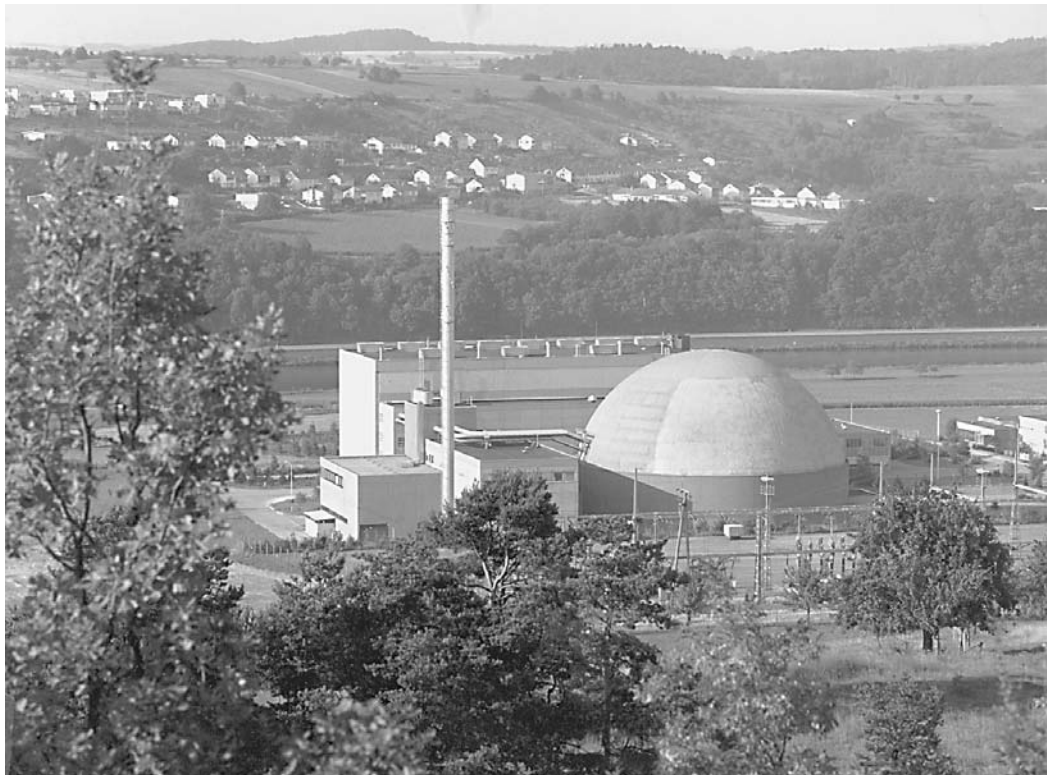
When Trittin came to London on Jan. 20 to discuss German plans for an end to nuclear reprocessing with U.K. Trade and Industry Secretary Stephen Byers, he was confronted with absolute nastiness from the British side. Byers told Trittin plainly that, if the German government stuck to its plans, which would invalidate long-term contracts into the year

2014, it would affect close to 4 billion deutschemarks (roughly \$2.5 billion) promised under these contracts to Britain's Sellafield reprocessing facility. The British view, Byers said, is that "it would be wrong for the company to suffer from a change in German policy over which they have no control. But I also stressed that the costs of that decision should not be borne by BNFL [British Nuclear Fuels, Ltd.], which had entered into legally binding contracts in good faith."

Byers said, "I made it clear that if the 650 tons of German spent fuel in store at Sellafield were not to be reprocessed, then it would have to be returned to Germany. The U.K. will not act as a storage depot for nuclear material." When Trittin argued that a change of government and, thereby, of nuclear policy in Germany, in his view, was a *force majeure* that invalidated all signed contracts, Byers shot back: "The German government is not God; therefore, there is no *force majeure* involved here."

The hard-line approach of the British seemed to have left its impact on Trittin, who had gotten away with a rather soft treatment from his colleague, French Environmental Minister Dominique Voynet, a few days earlier. Interviewed by British and German TV after his London talks with Byers, Trittin stuttered into the mikes, making rather incoherent statements on the affair. Back in Germany, he recovered somewhat, and said he was confident that his view would prevail over that of the British side. But in the meantime, the French government also woke up, declaring on Jan. 21 that it will insist on full monetary compensation for its own reprocessing contracts with Germany, which involves close to DM 9 billion.

The London affair demonstrated to German industry that the hard-line approach against Trittin and his supporters works. And, managers in the nuclear sector chose to arm-twist Chancellor Schröder, whom several of them also know personally. In memos and meetings between Jan. 21 and 25, nuclear industry managers made clear to Schröder that he would face legal action and claims for compensation and penalties for the breaking of treaties, in the range of several billion deutschemarks, maybe even more than DM 10 billion. It also became known in Bonn that an internal review on the issue at the Ministry of Justice has come to a similar conclusion, and urges the government to play strictly by the clauses of the law, in order to avoid such compensation payments.



*Under pressure from labor and industry, the German government was forced to retreat from its plan to shut down nuclear energy by next year. With the plan delayed, time has been gained for a vigorous offensive against the Green Party's anti-industrial insanity. Shown here is a nuclear plant at Obrigheim/Neckar, Germany.*

## **French workers welcome a Greenie**

The nuclear sector workers, who are organized in the public sector union OETV, were also remoralized, less by the British “no” to Trittin than by the treatment Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a leading German Greenie, got in France, when he visited the nuclear reprocessing plant at La Hague on Jan. 19. Cohn-Bendit, who heads the slate of the French Greens for the June 13 elections for the European Parliament, ran into deep trouble when he tried to enter the site, because several hundred enraged French nuclear workers blocked his way and told him to get lost, because he and his Green co-thinkers were about to kill their jobs at La Hague. French riot police had to escort Cohn-Bendit onto the site, as he was pelted by eggs. In the evening, when he tried to hold a public meeting with Greenies in nearby Cherbourg, he was forced to call it off, because utility workers threatened to turn the power off in the building where the meeting was to be held.

The affair was widely covered by German media, and caused German workers to reflect on their Green problem as well. In a discussion this author had on Jan. 20 with Rainer Dücker, chairman of the factory council at Preussen-Elektra, one of Germany's leading nuclear power producers, the labor leader said that he wished “that some of that French spirit would also be shown here, in our country,” that German workers would become more active against the Greenies.

Dücker said that nuclear workers would refrain from public actions before the scheduled Jan. 26 roundtable talks in

Bonn, in order to give Chancellor Schröder and the Social Democrats a last chance to push back Green demands for an instant withdrawal from nuclear technology. But, should the SPD make the exit from nuclear technology official government policy, Chancellor Schröder would run into a big conflict with labor. The nuclear sector workers would make the government feel what they think of this policy, Dücker said. Asked whether they would go as far as did the miners in early 1997, when they marched on the Bonn governmental district, Dücker said that the power sector workers have “other, far more effective means. . . . Just imagine, for example, an important soccer match, with all the broad attention that that has in the population, and immediately after the match is opened, the power to the stadium is turned off and stays turned off for the next 90 minutes. This will make clear to everybody what it would be like, if an important sector of our power supply is taken off the net—as the Greens want to do, and would do, with their policy.”

Dücker, as have other labor union members this author has talked to, hinted that selective power outages might also be used against other targets, similar to what was done in Cherbourg, which ruined Cohn-Bendit's planned panel against nuclear power, on Jan. 19.

## **‘Blackmail from abroad’**

German labor leaders view the French labor protests against the Greens, as justified. “We have a new generation

of nuclear power plants, the EPR, which is a joint Franco-German project, and if we say no to nuclear technology, it is the end for the German share in that promising, future-oriented technology,” Dücker said. Dücker added, when asked about other nuclear technologies such as the fast breeder and the high-temperature reactors, that it is highly regrettable that politicians lack the courage to get these technology projects built in Germany. He said that while the present government majority in Bonn is against nuclear technology, he is personally confident that the majority of the German population would vote for nuclear power, if properly informed about the consequences of an exit. “If Germany really walked out of nuclear technology now, it would be forced to return to it, after one generation, out of despair over secure power supplies,” he said. It would be a real catastrophe, and everybody would feel it, he said. Germany would be “blackmailed from abroad with a dictate on energy prices,” if it had no secure minimal national power supply of its own, which is only possible with modern nuclear technology.

The red-green government suffered a setback, and was forced to retreat. But it has not all of a sudden become pro-nuclear—not at all. The next round of conflicts is pre-programmed. A defeat of the anti-nuclear movement and a restored perspective for the development of nuclear technology in Germany can only be achieved by an activation of all those pro-nuclear people that have remained all-too-silent over the past years, because of frustration at the politicians’ sell-out of principles, at the concessions made to the Greens, because of fear of intimidation or even terrorism, as was launched at the peak of anti-nuclear protests in the mid-1980s. What Germany has been lacking—outside of the LaRouche movement, which has been an uncompromising defender of nuclear technology and an advocate of hard-line approaches against the Greens throughout the last 20 years—is a sufficient number of German workers, industrial managers, and politicians who show a commitment to fight the issue through.

For example, inside the SPD, there are many who disagree with the anti-nuclear course, but are too timid to go public with that. There are too few of the kind represented by Günter Supper, a nuclear engineer who joined the SPD after the oil crisis of 1973, when the party leadership still was for nuclear energy. Supper, who lives near Neuwied, in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, has been in the engineering workforce that built up the big nuclear power complex at Biblis, in the neighboring state of Hesse, in the early 1970s, and was later involved in the construction of the Mülheim-Kärlich nuclear plant, in his own state. The plant was closed down in 1988 shortly after completion and a test-run of several months, under the impact of the post-Chernobyl hysteria, in which the SPD played a leading role. Resisting the temptation to quit the party membership, Supper then chose to stay, in order to be a voice for pro-nuclear views

inside the party. This, however, has not earned him merits; quite the contrary: In mid-January, Supper learned that his name was eliminated from an inner-party proposal for a slate for regional elections, and he found out that this was done by regional SPD leaders because they ruled his views were not opportune.

This is an incident typical of many which have occurred inside the SPD nationwide. But unlike many other SPD party members who retreated under pressure into anonymity and inaction, Supper took his case to the press, making the inner-party practices of the SPD public in statements he circulated. In one of these, he termed Trittin a “Rasputin” behind Chancellor Schröder, and called upon his fellow Germans to learn from the “French nuclear power workers [who] would, if faced with such attacks on their integrity, as they are launched here, rather show the population how quick the lights can be turned off!”

The fact that the labor leader Dücker also spoke of such selective power-turnoffs, shows that the potential for a forceful labor offensive against the Greens is there. Whether the ferment will be tapped, will decide whether nuclear power has a future in Germany. Those that want to fight the Greens on that issue, have a loyal ally in the LaRouche movement in Germany.

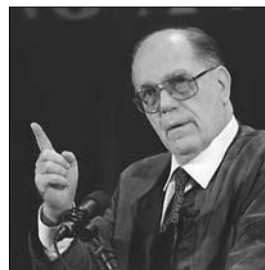
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