

Nuclear Chain Reaction

The effects of the political fallout from last April's explosion at the nuclear power plant at Chernobyl are already promising to be just as widespread as those of the radioactive cloud which wandered across Western Europe during the following 10 days. In particular, the Chernobyl accident has catalysed a growing sense of disenchantment and distrust of nuclear power among Europe's socialist parties.

The West's nuclear industry on both sides of the Atlantic has been desperately trying to stem the ebbing tide of public support, arguing that such an accident could not happen to their own reactors because of important design differences. The Soviet delegation to a post-mortem meeting organised in Vienna in August by the International Atomic Energy Agency appeared to confirm this judgment by shifting its explanation of the accident from 'human error' to design flaws', and promising to introduce changes that would prevent similar events in the future.

Neither move, however, has done much to salvage nuclear energy's decreasing credibility. The accident has had various types of political impact. Countries where doubts about the desirability of nuclear power are already part of official policy have seen these ideas reinforced. Sweden, for example, has seen opposition to nuclear power grow from 42 to 60% of the population over the past five years, and has reconfirmed its plans to close 12 nuclear power plants by the year 2010.

In the Netherlands, a wave of anti-nuclear feeling has persuaded the government to shelve plans announced at the beginning of last year for reactivating a nuclear power programme that was abandoned in the mid-1970s.

In countries which officially remain committed to expanding their nuclear programmes, the Chernobyl accident - just like its predecessor at Three Mile Island in



CND demonstration after Chernobyl

the US - has provided a key focus around which opposition groups have been able to mobilise widespread support.

In West Germany, for example, two major new reports, both of which considerably downgrade the difficulty of getting rid of existing nuclear plants, are causing major embarrassment to the government.

Meanwhile the Social Democratic Party, conscious of the continually growing sympathy for the anti-nuclear Greens, decided at a national congress in Nuremberg in August to commit itself to eliminating all nuclear power plants within the next 10 years. This commitment will be included in the platform on which the party will fight the general election next

January.

Inspired by the SPD example, the deputy leader of the Italian Socialist Party, Claudio Martelli, returned from the Nuremberg congress with demands that his party should adopt a strongly anti-nuclear position. Included within this is the demand for the withdrawal of Italian participation from the French fast-breeder reactor development programme. The clear popularity of Martelli's stand has led the right-wing Christian Democrats to charge him with electioneering to further split the shaky coalition government.

While Britain's Labour Party continues to agonise over the conflicts of principle with unions' concern for job protection within the nuclear industry, the lime-light is currently being stolen by a new campaign launched in September by an alliance of environmental pressure groups under the banner of 'Safe Energy'.

Even in France, with a traditionally strong cross-party pro-nuclear consensus, there are signs of change. Members of the French Socialist Party were among those who signed a joint statement by all European socialist parties at the beginning of September demanding a halt to the construction of new nuclear plants. The French reasoning was, admittedly, partly economic; the rapid expansion of nuclear power in France over the past few years means the country is now producing more electricity than it needs, and extra plant would just mean a greater surplus.

But on balance, Chernobyl has forced the pace in the creation of an increasingly solid anti-nuclear consensus across Europe. Nuclear power is now a major political issue across the continent. Chernobyl has made sure that it will be a significant factor in the general elections due in the near future in West Germany, Britain and Italy. •

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