
Argentine Energy Policy

Why London fears the nuclear program

by Dennis Small

On June 19 I was invited by Argentina's Atomic Energy Commission (CNEA) to tour their 335 MW nuclear facility known as "Atucha I," located about 100 kilometers north of the capital city of Buenos Aires. Atucha I is the first, and currently the only operational, nuclear plant in all of Ibero-America—and has been functioning without any significant problems since 1974.

It today produces 10 percent of the country's energy output. Argentina's nuclear project dates back to the immediate post-war period, but it began to be implemented only under the stimulus of Eisenhower's 1950 "Atoms for Peace" program. Now the country has an ambitious nuclear project stretching forward to the year 2000, whose mere mention raises the hackles of anti-development oligarchs far and wide, especially those based in the City of London.

What is more significant about the Argentine nuclear program is not its quantitative features—in fact, it envisions the construction of only six plants by the year 2000 producing 3,400 MW—but its commitment to procure for Argentina the full fuel-cycle in order to guarantee national self-sufficiency. Thus, the CNEA has opted for the heavy water/enriched uranium technology for all of its plants; has a heavy water plant of its own under construction, slated for completion in 1984; and is also building a reprocessing facility in order to recycle spent nuclear fuel.

Increasing national participation

Another top priority of the Argentine nuclear program is to achieve increasing participation of Argentine national capital and technology in nuclear plant construction. Thus at Embalse, Argentina's second plant now 85 percent complete, Argentine participation in design engineering was 40 percent, in civil engineering 100 percent, 95 percent in assembly, and 40 percent in the provision of electromechanical equipment. In Atucha II, the third plant slated for completion in the late 1980s, Argentine participation is expected to increase significantly.

As the President of the CNEA, Admiral Carlos Castro Madero, told *EIR* in an exclusive interview on June 16: "We hope this will enable Argentina to reach

the end of this century with the capacity to construct her own nuclear plants and to fuel them herself. . . . In this way, we will be relatively free from possible pressures in the political field which would restrict our access to nuclear technology."

Castro Madero's fears of foreign intervention to sabotage Argentina's nuclear development are well-founded. During the Carter administration, Argentina's alleged "violation of human rights" was repeatedly cited as justification for American attempts to stop the country's nuclear industry. During the same period, and surely inspired by Carter's antics, the Canadian suppliers of the CANDU technology for Argentina's second plant at Embalse, unilaterally and illegally embargoed shipments of heavy water until political changes to their liking occurred on the domestic Argentine scene. And most recently during the Malvinas war, the pro-British media in the United States resurrected a hackneyed propaganda campaign to convince the world that Argentina's only interest in nuclear energy was in order to build an atomic bomb. Argentina's refusal to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, on the grounds that it was an excuse to delimit the country's nuclear development, was repeatedly cited as "proof" of these charges.

On top of these political operations, Argentina has been placed under economic pressure to abandon or cut back on its nuclear program. Budget reductions—the result of international and domestic monetarist policies—have led to significant delays. The real reason that the British and other oligarchs so hate the Argentine nuclear program is that they correctly view it as the keystone project around which all of the country's pro-development forces are rallied—most especially including a powerful nation-building faction within the armed forces. These layers are convinced that Argentina must have nuclear energy, in the words of Castro Madero, because "Argentina necessarily will need a sustained growth in electricity demand because it is a country with lots to do, with some very unpopulated areas . . . Argentina is going to need energy for its development."

There is another feature of the Argentine nuclear approach which has earned it London's hatred. The CNEA maintains a large and growing program of nuclear cooperation with the other nations of Ibero-America. Peru, for instance, recently received its first nuclear test reactor from Argentina, and is also receiving invaluable assistance in manpower training. Brazil and Argentina have similarly embarked on a nuclear cooperation program which promises to qualitatively improve both nations' efforts in this direction. And in the Non-Aligned movement as well, Argentina has led up a campaign for the right of all developing sector nations to have nuclear energy, and for the transfer of nuclear technology from the advanced sector.