

Report from Rome by Antonio Gaspari

Behind the nuclear referendum

First of a two-part report on the upcoming nuclear referendum, which could plunge a NATO country into darkness.

In the wake of the June elections which brought a parade of Greens into Parliament, Italy faces a referendum in which voters will be asked to decide whether or not *any* nuclear power plants can be operated on Italian soil.

Even though the discussion on energy sources has recently become a topic for street-corner philosophers all over Italy, few among the experts, and none among the "ecologists," have stressed the extreme vulnerability of Italy's national energy situation. While all the more industrialized countries, after the petroleum crisis of 1973, have diversified their energy production, in an effort to minimize dependency on imported hydrocarbons, Italy has remained paralyzed.

Supply of Italy's energy needs from domestic production has remained at only 20% of the total demand. Compare Italy's figures with those of France, which in 1973 consumed 14 million tons of combustible fuel per year, from which it derived 40% of the country's electrical energy needs. Today, France consumes barely 400,000 tons, which make up only 2% of the electricity needs. This gives an idea of how short-sighted and anti-economical Italy's energy policy has been.

This foreign dependency becomes a real burden when one considers that Italy's most important suppliers are countries such as Libya, Iran, and the Soviet Union—three governments that violently hate nations which, like Italy, are part of the Atlantic alliance.

From the purely economic standpoint, even the malthusian bureau-

crats of the Bank of Italy have recognized that Italy, just to attain a 3% annual rate of growth, needs a significant increase in electrical energy production, at a lower price and with a drastically reduced dependency on foreign sources.

This problem had been resolved 25 years ago by the late Enrico Mattei, creator of the state sector industries, who initiated Europe's most ambitious nuclear program with the construction of the Latina plant to the south of Rome.

Nuclear-produced electrical energy is in fact technologically the safest and most economical solution. At present, the cost of each kilowatt hour produced by nuclear energy is 60 liras, exactly half the cost of oil-fueled plants (118 liras per kw). The national energy plan approved at the end of 1985, although scaled down, called for building a series of new plants which would have lowered dependency on hydrocarbons from 48% to only 17%, with an increase in nuclear production from 4% to 22%.

Moreover, for every 1,000 nuclear megawatts not installed, a further cost of 150 billion liras a year is incurred if these are replaced by coal burning plants, and 450 billion liras more if petroleum products are used.

Despite that, by exploiting the hysteria that followed the Chernobyl affair, the Greens have organized to stop construction of all power plants. They reject not only nuclear, but even large-scale hydroelectric plants.

Their opposition to nuclear and new technologies is not based on any-thing scientific; their counterpropo-

als to solve the energy problem are pure bluff—or in some cases, real disasters, if they were implemented. The Environment League (Lega Ambiente), heavily supported by the Italian Communist Party, has presented an alternative energy plan, consisting of notoriously unviable alternative energy sources, such as solar and wind power.

The League says that by 2000, wind power could provide Italy with 2,500 megawatts. This would mean installing 3-4 mw machines capable of capturing winds with blades no less than 100 meters (!) in diameter, which should cover a surface of 1,000 square kilometers (1/300 of the entire peninsula). Even disregarding the effect on the landscape and the infernal clatter produced by such machines, the cost of such clumsily produced energy would be prohibitive. Italy would need 22 trillion liras more to produce the same amount of energy, than with nuclear!

But what is most troubling about the "ecologists," is not their pretentious and incompetent rhetoric, but the violent means by which they seek to impose it. The peaceful, bucolic self-image of the Greens hides a violent and irrational nature, defined by a philosophy which views every technological change with horror. This ideology, like that of the peasant who opposes having railways pass through his land, unleashes Luddite, machine-smashing reactions.

Thus, after the dramatic protests at the plant in construction at Trino, at the end of July, the 70-ton cooling motor being shipped from the Ansaldo shipyards of Trieste in the far north-east of Italy, headed toward the Montalto di Castro nuclear plant, was set afire near Gubbio in the central Apennines.

To be continued.