

Soviets soon to face energy shortages

by Rachel Douglas

Nuclear power plant cancellations could lead to power shortages in the U.S.S.R., on top of the food shortages. The Chernobyl reactor explosion of 1986 sliced into Ukrainian energy production, did 8 billion rubles (officially acknowledged) damage, made the area surrounding it uninhabitable, and caused serious food and health problems for the population. Its political impact, too, is still being felt.

Challenges to the expansion of nuclear power generation are coming not only from protest groups, but from the governments of some Soviet republics. The areas involved, such as the Baltic states, are also hotbeds of anti-Moscow ferment among non-Russian ethnic groups, so—just as in the case of food shortages—the energy problem heats up an explosive political situation.

The share of nuclear plants in Soviet electric power generation was only 2% of capacity, as recently as 1975. By 1980, it had risen to 12.5 megawatts (MW) or 4.7%. In the next five years, it more than doubled, to 28.4 MW, 9% of total capacity.

During 1986-90, the capacity of nuclear power stations was supposed to rise by another 75%, to a total of 50.5 MW. In the western part of the Soviet Union, almost no fossil-fuel power stations are being added, so the majority of all power growth was slated to come from nuclear power. Nationwide, the growth rate of the nuclear power industry is supposed to be nearly triple the expansion of total capacity.

Now, the achievement of that goal is in doubt. In Pravda of Sept. 6, Prof. A. Protsenko, chairman of the U.S.S.R. State Committee for Utilization of Atomic Energy, defended the nuclear power industry in tones of desperation, as having contributed economic benefits "that are not fully appreciated."

Chernobyl, he argued, was not a phenomenon peculiar to the nuclear industry. Rather, all Soviet industry is falling apart! "Incompetence and conservatism . . . during the stagnation years" (the Brezhnev era of 1964-82), Protsenko wrote, caused "serious malfunctions . . . in various spheres of industry. Numerous accidents in industry, on railroad transport, on ships, and in the aviation sphere were largely the result of stagnation in technology and increasing irresponsibility. Chernobyl was one of them."

Soviet blunders

As Protsenko admitted, Soviet investment and management practices in the civilian industrial sectors have led to inadequate or hazardous infrastructure and factories. The low wages for nuclear workers don't help, he added: An operator in charge of a reactor like Chernobyl No. 3 earns less than a city bus driver.

In challenges to Soviet nuclear plants, the complainers had plenty of data to cite. (The spectacular blow-up of Chernobyl's third reactor, of course, has been used by anti-nuclear activists in the West, against the further development of cheap, safe nuclear power; the Soviets have given nuclear power a bad name.)

In late August, as *Izvestia* reported on Sept. 1, the Lithuanian SSR government cut off funding of construction of the third unit at the Ignalina Atomic Energy Station. The grounds for cancellation were that the original "seismic safety margins" were too low—the region has had stronger earthquakes this century, than was assumed for a worst-case quake at Ignalina—and that "violations" occurred in construction. In mid-September, Ignalina was the scene of a thousands-strong protest demonstration organized by the Initiative Group for the Support of Perestroika, after two fires broke out at one of its reactors. Radio Vilnius said that "the Lithuanian Government and the general public . . . are resolutely against construction of the third reactor at Ignalina."

On Sept. 7, *Izvestia* said that "construction of a nuclear-powered heat thermal power station near Minsk, Belorussia has been halted," because of alarm after Chernobyl. It will be reconfigured as a gas-fired power station, but will come on line only in 1993, not 1989 as originally planned. Radio Kiev reported Sept. 12 on agitation by "anxious residents" against the planned expansion of the Nikolayev nuclear power plant in the southern Ukraine. On Sept. 7, *Izvestia* carried a letter from a reader who was "horrified" at a recent report from the Zaporozhye Atomic Power Station, that concrete was poured for its sixth reactor's containment structure in "half the normative time," even though Zaporozhye has been the scene of non-nuclear industrial accidents, attributed to breakneck construction speeds.

The Soviet nuclear industry's problems, Protsenko said in Pravda, come in the face of "a most acute shortage of energy for the national economy." During his visit to Krasnoyarsk, Siberia in September, party chief Mikhail Gorbachov remarked, "We have problems both with the construction of nuclear stations and their siting. . . . [But] we cannot do without nuclear power."

The Soviets build large plants: Chernobyl's two downed reactors (two more were planned) were each 1 MW, while each unit at Ignalina is 1.5 MW. The elimination of any one of them noticeably dents power production. Chernobyl, Ignalina, Zaporozhye, Nikolayev—the capacity already cancelled or questioned just at these plants amounts to 6-10 MW, or from 12-20% of the nuclear capacity planned to be added between 1985 and 1995.