British Reconsider New Nuclear Plants

by Marsha Freeman

After 30 years of insanity and anti-science folly, some leading governments, including both Britain and the United States, are "going nuclear."

On Jan. 19, the leader of the Amicus union in Great Britain, representing more than 1 million public and private sector workers, issued a statement urging the British government to deal with the impending energy crisis, or "the UK could face blackouts, job losses, and rocketing household fuel bills over the next five years." The main reason for the outsourcing of jobs, the union states, "is no longer labour costs; it's high energy costs." Amicus states that "successive governments have shied away from difficult decisions, and left us with ageing nuclear power stations, and as yet no plans to start a new building program."

The union plans a public education campaign to reverse this policy. Its membership includes workers in the steel, auto, aerospace, energy, construction, shipbuilding, food, paper, and other manufacturing industries. Support for a nuclear revival has already come from the companies that employ Amicus members, in the Confederation of British Industry,

If Britain does not return to a nuclear infrastructure policy, it will become more dependent upon fossil fuels to produce electricity. As imported natural gas becomes more necessary and more expensive, and the cost of producing power in plants using domestic coal skyrockets in order to meet environmental restrictions, the cost of energy will rise.

Also contributing to the British government's charting a new energy course are: the political turn in the United States, after 30 years, back to the building of new nuclear power plants; the example set by Finland, which will put a new nuclear plant on line by 2009, showing that this can be done in Europe; the supply problems with increasingly imported natural gas; and the realization that depleting supplies of domestic petroleum from the North Sea will lead to increased imports.

But this is not just a problem for one nation. At a meeting of European Union Energy Ministers in Brussels on Jan. 24, the French government presented a proposal for other countries to do what France has done to avert rising energy costs and potential supply crises—go nuclear. (France is almost 80% nuclear.) The paper is France's contribution to the European Commission's Green Book on energy policy, scheduled to be published in March.

Teollisuuden Voima Oy

Will Britain follow Finland's nuclear lead? The first European nuclear power plant to be constructed in a decade, shown here in an artist's illustration, is Finland's 1,600-MW Pressurized Water Reactor, being built by Areva and Siemans. This is Finland's fifth nuclear plant, and is scheduled to be on line by 2009.

Pragmatically noting the results of the insane free-market deregulation policy of the European Union, the French proposal warns, "Owing to the existence of a European electricity market, the member states as a whole will then have to absorb the resulting price rises."

Toward a Sane Industrial Policy

Last November, the British government announced a new review of energy policy. On Jan. 23, British Trade and Industry Secretary Alan Johnson reported that the review will include a serious look at building a new generation of nuclear power plants. He released a "consultation document" titled, "Meeting the Energy Challenge," which poses five key challenges that the energy review will consider. "There is not a do-nothing option," Johnson stated, given what Britain faces. Those energy challenges will be discussed publicly for the next three months, and the government will release its new energy policy proposals by Summer.

The review will undoubtedly overturn the 2003 energy policy review, which opted for conservation, and ridiculous projections for increased use of expensive and inefficient windmills and other "renewable" energy sources. At that time, it was proposed that renewable resources would provide 20% of electricity by 2020. Much of that was to come from heavily subsidized and totally unreliable wind power.

The current review is being carried out by Energy Minister Malcolm Wicks. Wicks believes there are no practical obstacles to a new generation of nuclear power plants, and he posed the question: "If gas, as well as renewables, were to fill the gap, how comfortable will we be relying on imports for 80% of our supplies?" Energy is "not just a question of keeping the lights on, but national security," he said.

The major weakness in the plan the government is considering is the continuation of the "liberalized and privatized" market structure, which, in fact, has nearly destroyed Britain's nuclear industry. Minister Wicks told the *Guardian* on Jan. 23 that it was "dead wrong" to think that the private sector would not invest in nuclear power.

The sell-off of the state-owned nuclear industry to the private sector in Great Britain in the past several years left that nation without a nuclear industry, because electricity deregulation drove prices so low, that nuclear providers could not remain financially solvent.

The other obstacle is that of political sabotage. The United States has changed its nuclear oversight procedures in order to protect nuclear plant suppliers from the anti-nuclear political sabotage and unreasonable regulations that led to the cancellation of more than 100 domestic nuclear power plants in the past 30 years. Now British Nuclear Fuels has already made the government aware that nuclear plant licensing has to be "fast tracked," eliminating the ability of anti-nuclear intervenors to delay construction, as has been the case in the past.

The British manufacturers' group Engineering Employers Federation (EEF) is urging the government to move quickly on the review.

Nuclear or Bust

Nuclear energy generates about 20% of Britain's electricity. Natural gas provides a stunning 40%, since Britain moved away from nuclear and coal-fired capacity over the past decade, as did the United States. Currently, 90% of the natural gas comes from Britain's North Sea fields, but because of the reportedly faster-than-expected decline in reserves, 10% of the gas is now imported via the European gas network. Depletion of the North Sea fields is projected to lead to an 80% import dependence for gas by 2020.

Over the next 15 years, old nuclear plants that have reached the end of their productive lifetime will be decommissioned. If they are not replaced, nuclear power could provide as little as 7% of Britain's electricity requirements by 2020.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, and his chief science advisor Sir David King, who told *The Independent* last May that public perception of the dangers of nuclear did not necessarily accord with reality, have their work cut out for them. Putting nuclear power plants back on the agenda of Britain's energy policy will be a political fight, especially since the Labour government has supported and promoted every unscientific environmental hoax in the book, leading with the danger of global warming from increased atmospheric carbon dioxide emissions. King, in fact, is infamous for his extremist statement in November 2004, that "global warming is a far greater threat to the world than international terrorism."

A serious revival in nuclear energy in Great Britain will mean leaving behind the unscientific jibberish of global warming and the Kyoto Protocol. But the nuclear issue is now on the table, and the outcome will not only be critical for Britain, but for Europe as a whole.