



DAVID WALTERS REPLIES

### The workers' movement and nuclear power

IT IS good to see groups on the left, Marxists ones in particular, start to not only address climate change and energy issues, but nuclear energy in particular. Thus, this reply to the recent article on nuclear energy in Permanent Revolution 8.

I write to take issue with the tone and specifics of the two articles: The Workers' Movement and Nuclear Power and the box titled FAQs About Nuclear Power. I think both fall far short of what is expected from those that claim to base themselves in scientific socialism. Having said that, I think the bulleted programmatic points in the first article are an excellent beginning to develop a Marxist programme for the working class around energy issues. So I applaud PR for taking this up.

Specifically, the PR article focuses on Britain. I'm at a slight disadvantage in addressing this because I work as a power plant (natural gas) operator in the US. I've worked as a control operator for the last 24 years and have been a shop steward in my union for almost that length of time. Obviously I've been involved in energy issues.

The British have had singularly the worst nuclear industry in the world. Yes, even compared to the Russian experience and Chernobyl. The structure of the British nuclear industry was built around a very poor design, the MAGNOX gas-cooled reactor. In addition to being a "unique" design built almost exclusively in Britain, and thus not being able to draw from other examples, it was extremely expensive to build, more so than any other design in the world. It was designed not as a civilian nuclear reactor, but as a producer of weapons of mass destruction: for weapons grade plutonium. Secondly, decommissioning was simply an afterthought: MAGNOX reactors are ten times more

expensive to decommission than comparably sized reactors in the US or anywhere else. Thirdly, there was zero financing of these decommissioning costs built into the nuclear industry project, so that it has to be dealt with as a very expensive afterthought.

This was not the case in any other nuclear industry where cheaper, quicker and self-financed decommissioning was built into the plans to develop nuclear energy, even in the chaotic US capitalist energy market. Therefore, it's scientifically and politically irresponsible to look at nuclear energy based mostly on the British experience.

Secondly, using Greenpeace as a source of expertise on nuclear energy is like looking to Zionists as a source of expertise on Palestinian self-determination. Greenpeace is a petit bourgeois and reactionary organisation that prefers coal to nuclear. They profess opposition to coal but if given the choice, they prefer coal. Coal, as noted in many

### Socialist are for workers' control and a planned, economy. That means we have to look at what will work for humanity not which simply "feels good"

places, is the single largest stationary source of both particulate and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In the US alone it is responsible for over 30,000 deaths "a year". It is the single largest source of mercury pollution in the world today and is a major source of other heavy metal contamination such as uranium and thorium. In fact, coal plants today produce more background radiation than nuclear plants do. Greenpeace doesn't care. They are religious fundamentalist opponents

of nuclear energy.

Socialist are for workers' control and a planned, democratic economy. That means we have to look at what will work for humanity and not which simply "feels good". Solar and wind both "feel good" but neither can supply the needed base-load (the actual 24 hour, 7 days a week generation needed to keep the grid running in any region or country). This is why wind and other "renewables" advocated by Greenpeace and their ilk cannot replace coal and natural gas: none of them are base-load capable. The Danes have the highest wind energy implementation in the world today. They claim "20% capacity" of wind to other forms of energy. The reality is that because wind only blows about 30% of the time, the Danish grid is backed up by: Norwegian and Swedish hydro-power and Sweden's massive nuclear grid. The Danes, because of their investment in wind (which means paying off the turbines even when they are not turning making electricity), pay the highest rates for power in Europe.

In the FAQs on Nuclear Power several errors, even out right untruths, are stated.

The FAQs states: "But most of the gas we use in Britain is for heating and hot water, for homes and for

industrial use. Nuclear power, which can only supply electricity, therefore cannot replace that energy." First it should be obvious that if nuclear power can't provide this energy, then neither can wind, solar or burning garbage. But the premise is wrong. So wrong as to almost make it a lie. It is a huge gaff by the writer; in each of the areas that gas is used it can be replaced by plentiful nuclear energy. In the US many houses are "100% electric" as natural gas prices continue to



climb, following both oil and coal prices. Secondly, nuclear can even provide district heating as it does in Russia as well as process steam for industry. So this “86%” is a made up number with no basis in fact. A real workers’ government would work to replace all industrial and residential gas use with electricity

By using currently existing advanced heavy water reactors, we can actually burn all of it up in a form of recycling known as DUPIC.

Secondly, as we move onto more advanced reactors, such as the Liquid Fluoride Thorium Reactor, we can not only continue to burn up the worlds stock of nuclear

has less radiation than say, large granite buildings in big cities or coal plants, all the latter of which discharge raw uranium into the air and in the form of ash on a regular basis.

In the German case, as we wait for reviews of this study, the authors have not proposed how cancer rates have increased. There is no “causal effect” of the plant showing where a cancer causing element occurred.

We should also compare studies of people living around or even down stream from a coal plant. These plants regularly kill people now. Compared to coal, I would rather live in a nuclear power plant than within 100 miles of a coal plant.

The program of PR that is proposed is basically good. I would make some changes, or really, only one: fusion power is only a theoretical possibility. It has been “50 years off” for the last 50 years. There is a real, intermediate yet long term, and proven technology already around: the above mentioned Liquid Fluoride Thorium Reactor, which doesn’t even use uranium, using 100 times less fuel per weight than a current generation light water reactor, produces 1/1000ths the amount of waste and whose fuel, thorium, is four times as abundant as uranium. The plants are not only 100 times as safe (they are not pressurised but run at one atmosphere) but are three times cheaper to build.

Comradely,  
David Walters  
[left-atomics.blogspot.com](http://left-atomics.blogspot.com)

### **Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear organisations have no proposals to deal with “waste”. Spent nuclear fuel doesn’t go away if we stop building nuclear plants**

produced by nuclear energy! That is “energy security”.

Elsewhere in the FAQ, the issue of dealing with spent nuclear fuel is flippantly dealt with by arguing that no one has any “acceptable” means of dealing with it.

Firstly, spent nuclear fuel is being dealt with in the short term currently by safe on-site storage. No one, anywhere in the world, has died or even become ill from safely stored nuclear “waste”. Even under the worse of Stalinist mismanagement in Russia or profit driven capitalist systems.

Secondly, more and more spent fuel is being reprocessed back into fuel. Both France, Japan, China and the US are building reprocessing centres to extract the 97% of the energy that remains after use from used nuclear fuel rods. It’s expensive and there are certainly safety issues, but it’s a plan that actually reduces high-level waste, as opposed to Greenpeace’s perspective that sees no solution and therefore prefers to bury its head hoping the problem will go away.

This is a major flaw in Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear organisations. They have no proposals to deal with “waste” (it’s only waste if you want to get rid of it.) The issue of spent nuclear fuel doesn’t go away if we stopped building nuclear power plants. It’s still there. What to do? Pro-nuclear activists (as distinct from industry touts) argue that it needs to be used.

“waste” but these reactors themselves only produce 0.1% of current reactors’ high-level radioactive waste stream. This is a good thing that socialists ought to fight for, not oppose. We can get rid of the amount we have and produce less of it with more reactors.

Are reactors safe? Well even Greenpeace has given up on the “Chernobyl” scenario since the industry clearly addressed this issue world wide. But the German study, the one cited in the article about an increase in leukaemia, has yet to be peer-reviewed to my knowledge. It is a serious study but is still fraught with method error: for example, it is in contradiction to the literally hundreds of other studies around the world that not only show nuclear power plants to be safe to live near, but in some cases actually have lower cancer rates. This is because the average nuclear plant