# Nuclear power, environmental crisis and the trades unions

*Having opposed building new nuclear power plants in its White Paper in 2003 the government has launched a new energy review which can have no other purpose than to overturn the government's previous position. The suspicion that the Great Leader had already decided that a new generation of nuclear power plants is necessary was confirmed by his recent speech to the CBI which exposed the bogus nature of the 'review' process. There is little support for such a move, yet ironically, the major trades unions are appealing to the government to follow this course.* **Martin Wicks** *examines the issue of nuclear energy and the policy of the unions. (*From the latest issue of **SOLIDARITY***)*

Blair's speech to the CBI has created a furore, and not only amongst those who are inveterate opponents of nuclear energy. The speech not only pre-empted the review, it was designed to silence opposition within the Cabinet. Apparently there will be no white paper to decide on a new generation of nuclear power plants since this would serve as a focus for opposition. In his speech Blair said:

"Essentially, the twin pressures of climate change and energy security are raising energy policy to the top of the agenda in the UK and around the world. The facts are stark. By 2025, if current policy is unchanged there will be a dramatic gap on our targets to reduce CO2 emissions, we will become heavily dependent on gas and at the same time move from being 80% to 90% self-reliant in gas to 80% to 90% dependent on foreign imports, mostly from the Middle East, and Africa and Russia.

These facts put the replacement of nuclear power stations, a big push on renewables and a step change on energy efficiency, engaging both business and consumers, back on the agenda with a vengeance. If we don't take these long-term decisions now we will be committing a serious dereliction of our duty to the future of this country."

Blair assembles facts to justify a pre-determined argument. He does not examine the facts in order to come to a conclusion. There is a fundamental contradiction which underlies his position. His government has long supported a liberalised energy market. There is nothing to stop 'the market' delivering new nuclear power stations now; except the risk and the "eye-wateringly large costs" (a Treasury prediction according to the Guardian).

## The current market structure has failed

But if the market works, asked the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, why is a government 'decision' necessary in the first place?

"…in the context of the Government's faith in liberalised market it is unclear what any 'decision' or 'decision on nuclear' would amount to. We put this point repeatedly to the Secretary of State, yet he was unable to offer any explanation. The real issue facing the government is in fact whether the current structure of the liberalised market and policy framework will deliver sufficient investment in low-carbon forms of generation in a timely manner. Yet the consultation document does not address this adequately perhaps because to do so would be tantamount to admitting that the current market structure has failed." *"Keeping the lights on: Nuclear, Renewables and Climate Change".* House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Report.

Blair's government will not admit that the privatised energy market is fundamentally flawed, since this would bring its 'free market' ideological pack of cards crashing down. Already, in 2002 the government was obliged to rescue the privatised nuclear company British Energy at a cost of billions to the taxpayer (including decommissioning it could add up to £12 billion).

Today there is little support for a new generation of nuclear plants. The Sustainable Development Commission Report said that "nuclear power is not the answer to tackling climate change or security of supply". There is "no justification for bringing forward a new nuclear power programme at present." The House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee EAC) is likewise opposed, supporting the emphasis of the 2003 White Paper on energy efficiency and renewables as cornerstones of future energy policy. In it's report it says:

"Over the next ten years, nuclear power cannot contribute either to the need for more generating capacity or to carbon reductions as it simply could not be built in time."

The Secretary of State for Energy has admitted that it might take from 15 to 17 years before a new nuclear power station could become operational.

## The 'generating gap'

But what about the energy gap which is predicted? The EAC has estimated that by 2016 between 15 and 20GW of electricity generating plant will be decommissioned; nearly a quarter of total UK generating capacity. 8GW of nuclear capacity is scheduled to close by 2014, and by 2023, only Sizewell B will be operational.

The government's own energy White Paper in 2003 endorsed the view of its Performance and Innovation Unit that new gas-fired plant, renewables and energy efficiency measures could make up for the potential 'generating gap'.

The very idea of insufficient energy accepts as a given that energy use will remain at current levels. It fails to address the fact that the capitalist system is a system of phenomenal waste, because production and energy use is determined by the narrow interests of 'efficiency', measured by the balance sheet and profit levels.

The failure of the Blair government to subsidise low-carbon generating technologies, which are currently more expensive than gas or coal, results from its ideological free market fundamentalism. The EAC poses the question:

"If the government does indeed make a decision on nuclear, it is unclear why it should not also come to a decision on off-shore wind, marine, or micro-CHP, let alone the many possible measures to support energy efficiency."

The acceptance in the 2003 White Paper of the possibility of reductions in energy use has been abandoned, partly because state intervention has the unacceptable stench of 'Old Labour', and partly because it contradict with the logic of capitalist production, which is heresy for New Labour.

## 'Environmental sustainability'

Environmental sustainability is a much used phrase in all manner of government documents. But such an aim is impossible without serious action to stop the waste of resources which results from a system in which 'growth' is seen as a positive thing

irrespective of its social and environmental consequences. As Ken Livingstone pointed out in a Guardian article, up to two thirds of electricity is wasted because of the centralised nature of production, and its transmission over long distances. The EAC report identifies the need for 'distribution generation' (small scale generation on a local basis at the point of demand) rather than the wasteful national grid system. Distributed generation offers big improvements in efficiency, particularly in the case of 'combined heat and power'.

Electricity losses on the UK grid system are estimated on average at around 10%, whilst the efficiency of coal power stations can be as low as 35%. If both the electricity and the heat load can be utilised, efficiencies of more than 90% can be achieved. It is estimated that if half of the domestic central heating boilers in the UK were replaced by micro-CHP units, by 2020 the total generating capacity would amount to 13GW, delivering at peak winter periods as much as the current nuclear power stations.

The centralised distribution networks of all manner of service industries provide 'economies of scale' for the big companies. But the cost of these centralised systems is vast numbers of heavy goods vehicles criss-crossing the country, pouring out pollutants and burning up oil, taking, for example food to be processed at one end of the country, only to return from whence it came. This may be 'efficient' from the standpoint of the balance sheet of the companies, but it is entirely irrational and inefficient given its social, health and environmental impact.

## Shift from road to rail?

The EAC criticises the government for failing to clarify the nature of its current review. If it is supposed to be a wider debate (rather than one narrowly focused on electricity production) it would need to address all aspects of energy consumption, in particular transport and the domestic sector, in both of which energy consumption is significantly increasing "due to the fact that government policies diametrically opposed to the target of 60% carbon reduction by 2050", set out in the Energy White Paper. This is apparent when you consider the wreckage of its transport policy.

Of all the failures of the Blair government, probably one of the greatest is in relation to transport. It is impossible to tackle the environmental crisis without halting and reversing the growth in road transport. In the early days of the current government John Prescott made the statement that if there had been no shift from road to rail within five years then he would have failed in his job. This shift was said to be necessary to cut emissions which contributed to global warming. When the five years was up and Prescott was reminded of his comments he denied them, though they were a matter of record. The government's transport strategy was abandoned and they have since accepted there will be an increase in the number of cars on the road.

Whilst they were forced to close down Railtrack as a share trading company, the government refused to re-nationalise the industry, partly for ideological reasons (they are free market fundamentalists) and partly because Brown does not want the company's debt added to his public balance sheet. Even worse the Department for Transport has now issued a timetable for the railways which institutes cuts in services which can only have the impact of driving people back on the road. In rural areas in particular the cuts are considerable even though, to take parts of the South West, local service use has increased by up 40% in the last five years. The framework timetables were determined purely in order to cut the level of subsidy.

The rail unions and socialists have long argued that the only way to get more people to transfer from road to rail is to provide cheap and reliable services. But the refusal of the

government to end the disastrous experiment of rail privatisation has meant that private companies are leeching money out of the system and pushing prices up to such an extent that not many people can afford the price of tickets. That the number of journeys has increased is a reflection of the increasing level of congestion on roads. Nationally, the 1 billion passenger journey mark has been passed for the first time in 50 years. Despite this the government has accepted that they can do nothing to halt the increase in car numbers.

## The nuclear record

Successive studies by British governments in 1989, 1995 and 2002 all came to the conclusion that in a liberalised electricity market, electric utilities will not build nuclear power plants without government subsidies and guarantees capping costs. Even when Thatcher decided on a new round of building, only one plant, Sizewell B was built. In 1989 when the electricity industry was being privatised, the nuclear plants were not attractive to private investors, and the government was forced to withdraw them from sale and had to create two publicly owned companies, Nuclear Electric and Scottish Nuclear, to own and operate them. Tory Energy Minister of the time, John Wakeham bemoaned the fact that "unprecedented guarantees" were being sought. "I am not willing to underwrite the private sector in this way." Good God, this is the 'free market'.

The 1995 review led to the privatisation of the more modern plants, in a new company British Energy. However, the review found no economic case for new plants. British Energy proposed the building of new plants to replace the aging Magnox ones, but insisted these would not be feasible without government subsidy. The 2003 review likewise concluded that new build was not economic.

## Poor operational performance

The history of civil nuclear power in the UK has been characterised (in the words of the EAC) by "extensive government subsidies, time and cost overruns, and poor operational performance". In the case of Dungeness B it took 24 years from the start of construction to commercial operation and the plant has only operated on average at 37% of its planned generating capacity since then. In the case of the latest one, Sizewell B, the UK's only pressurised water reactor, construction costs escalated form £1.8 billion to over £3 billion, whilst generating costs have been estimated at around twice the current cost of electricity from gas or coal.

Much has been said about the so-called generation 3 plants being much more efficient. But no western country has yet built one, and there is nothing to say that technological difficulties will not be encountered. The EAC says:

"The past history of the nuclear industry gives little confidence about the timescales and costs of new build. This does not mean that a new generation of nuclear power stations cannot be built to time and cost, but it does mean that investors have little basis for assessing the risks involved and may, therefore, require a higher rate of return."

## 'Clean fuel'

Any cursory investigation of the history of the industry and its costs provides sufficient reason for opposing a new generation of plants. To assert as some do that nuclear power is "clean" is ridiculous. An accident at a nuclear power plant has the potential to have catastrophic consequences as Chernobyl in the Ukraine and Three Mile Island in the United States have shown. Britain has had its own consequences of accidents at Winscale (now Sellafield) and even the Irish government has been pushed to challenge the

continued production at Sellafield as a result of concentrated clusters of cancers in Ireland, downwind from the plant. Supporters of new build argue that the new generation is much safer, but no industry can be made accident proof, least of all nuclear power. Even worse, when the industry is privately owned, with the profit motive at its heart, the danger of accidents is even greater.

Information recently gained by a Liberal Democrat MP from Minister Malcolm Wicks indicates 57 accidents at nuclear plants since this government came to office. They ranged from radiation leaks and machinery failure to contamination of ground water and employees' clothes, and a fire. Eleven were serious enough to be classed as an "incident" or "serious incident" on international nuclear measures.

Three incidents were recorded last year, all at Sellafield, Cumbria, including a large leak of highly radioactive nuclear fuel which forced the closure of the Thorp reprocessing plant in April. High radiation was also detected in the Hales storage plant and three staff were contaminated while carrying out maintenance.

For all the talk of terrorism by Blair the risk of terrorist attacks on nuclear plants does not seem to be on his radar. Calculations produced by the Oxford Research Group suggest that an attack on the high level waste tanks at Sellafield would dwarf the scale of the Chernobyl accident.

## Decommissioning

Then there is the cost of decommissioning. The latest estimated cost from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority is £70 billion. A new generation would drive the cost up. As it is the problem of storage of nuclear waste has yet to be resolved. No community wants a nuclear dump on its doorstep. The problem has yet to be resolved anywhere in the world. Even in the USA no long term dump has yet been built. New build would create more waste to be dealt with.

## Unions to the rescue?

Ironically, among the few supporters of building a new generation of nuclear plants, we find some of the country's major trades unions. Whilst their support was once pragmatic, based on the fact that they had members in the industry, they have now picked up on the argument supported by a very small number of erstwhile environmentalists, such as the Gaia theorist James Lovelock, that nuclear power will be necessary to tackle global warning. In the case of Amicus it approaches the question from the standpoint of energy prices; the need to cut prices so that British business can 'compete successfully' in the global market. Amicus appears to believe that regulation of the market can produce the goods.

"The market alone is unable to deliver a reliable, efficient and secure supply of energy. The Government must set a broad framework with the necessary fiscal and policy regimes to allow the market to deliver (our emphasis) and to ensure the security of supply."

In the case of the GMB, National Officer Gary Smith said:

"GMB is campaigning for a new generation of nuclear power stations on existing sites. This will improve the UK's security of energy supply and preserve our nuclear technology industry. It should also maintain existing jobs and in the longer term create new ones. However, GMB believes it is vital that expenditure on the new nuclear programme is not at the expense of investment in other equally important energy sources. The current level of

investment in renewables, bio-fuels and micro generation must be maintained."

The GMB, at least expressed its concern over private ownership of nuclear energy. In March it responded to the proposed privatisation of British Nuclear Group by raising the prospect of a 'Railtrack in the nuclear industry'. The day after Blair's speech it said:

"'GMB consider that nuclear power has an important role to play as part of a balanced energy policy. However GMB do not wish to see a 'railtrack' in the nuclear industry. The public will only be convinced that the safety concerns - that rightly arise - will be dealt with properly if the industry is in public hands and properly accountable to the public. Also GMB consider that energy matters are too important to be regulated by a quango. The government itself must take this role and be answerable to parliament for it."

Both the GMB and Amicus talk about a 'balanced' energy policy. But they do not challenge the idea that there will be a 'gap' in provision which is one of the primary reasons being given for the supposed need for new nuclear power stations. The question of the energy crisis cannot be analysed in isolation from the of the context of the environmental crisis with its origins in the logic of capitalism; the constant war for market share, increased 'productivity' and profit levels.

## Conclusions

It is abundantly clear that there can be no new building of nuclear power plants without either government subsidy or a government commitment on prices (making the consumer pay higher prices). The government has said that there will be no public money for such investment. However, it will have to choose between accepting that there will be no new generation of plants, or it will have to decide to throw public money at the private companies to induce them to take the risk of 'generation 3′ with virtually no experience to draw on.

The trades unions, instead of offering support for a new generation of nuclear power stations should be challenging the government's faith in liberalisation. A 'decision' on nuclear power should not be based on a technical debate which accepts the current economic framework. If even the EAC, not peopled with revolutionaries, can see the possibility of significant reductions in energy consumption, then why can't the trades unions?

The 'rules' of the market do not need to be followed. The government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela has given oil to impoverished countries in the Caribbean at below market rates. It has exchanged oil with Cuba in return for doctors to provide medical services to the Venezuelan poor. In our own experience the Atlee government did not accept that health care had to be organised as a saleable commodity, available only to those who could purchase it.

A political and ideological leap, however, is necessary. Tackling the environmental crisis will not be done by 'market mechanisms'. These have recently been subject to ridicule in the case of 'credits' to pollute which have apparently been dished out a bit too liberally, much to the amusement of the polluters in chief in Washington.

A political struggle within the unions to abandon their support for a new generation of nuclear power plants is an important part of the struggle to radicalise them. It would be a political disaster of the first magnitude if the trades unions found themselves in the camp of the Blair government, in opposition to the environmental movements, and especially the radicalised young people who should be in the unions, but often tend to see them as self-

interested conservative organisations supporting a neo-liberal government.

The Amicus position especially epitomises the idea of ’social partnership’ in which the unions are in alliance with British business in order to ’succeed’ in the cut-throat global marketplace. Such a position is one of complete prostration before the logic and rules of an economic system which wastes resources and lives on an unprecedented historical scale.

Supporting new nuclear power stations would be a step back for the unions, effectively supporting amongst other things large subsidies for big business at a great social cost for workers across the world. Socialists and opponents of this organised system of waste must fight to break the unions from their national perspective towards alliances with workers across the world and movements of the oppressed and impoverished, fighting against the economic, social, environmental and political consequences of an economic system which threatens an environmental and social catastrophe. New nuclear power plants would add to the danger and to the criminal waste of resources.