

THE POWER STRUGGLE ABROAD



Citizen opposition is playing a major role in blocking nuclear power abroad. BRIAN MARTIN reports.

People strongly suspected of having firm links with terrorist factions are in the vanguard of the anti-nuclear movement currently upsetting European weekends.

— Frank Cranston,
The Canberra Times,
October 3, 1977

Such is one stereotype of the type and form of opposition to nuclear power: the actions of a violent, politically motivated and tiny minority of the populace. Another stereotype is that of the middle class eco-freaks, unconcerned about the economy or the workers. Such stereotypes are fostered by pro-nuclear forces, and often by newspaper reports, inadvertently or not. As usual, the stereotypes contain only a grain of truth, and obscure the more complex reality behind them.

The existence of citizen opposition to nuclear power around the world should not be considered separately from the forces and motivations behind the promotion of nuclear power. Nuclear power as a source of energy in the form of electricity was chosen as a major option in the 1950s, and since that time has been strongly promoted and subsidised by various national governments. There are several characteristics of nuclear power that distinguish it from other energy sources, such as local solar heating, that have long been equally viable alternatives. Briefly, nuclear power provides energy

from an expensive, dangerous and centralised source, which facilitates centralised control of markets and planning, and requires decision making by experts and elites. The organisational forms which have grown up to promote this mode of energy generation are represented by massive governmental or corporate production and supply networks, research and planning institutes, building and appliance industries geared to a standardised electricity grid, and legal and administrative restraints on alternative energy policies. In the



intellectual arena nuclear power has been promoted through the idea that progress requires growth of expensive and massive technologies, and that freedom consists primarily of a choice between commodities.

Citizen opposition to nuclear power began to swell in the early 1970s. A number of reasons can be suggested for this: the greatly increased awareness of

environmental problems developed in the late 1960s; the appearance of nuclear power as a significant and perceptible feature of the landscape (nuclear power today still provides only 1 to 2% of total energy produced); and a questioning of the proclaimed goodness of economic growth, science and technology, and experts.

Most of the actions by citizens and citizen groups on the nuclear power issue have been taken within 'established channels'; they include making statements (by concerned scientists), intervening in licensing procedures, lobbying local legislatures, circulating petitions, distributing information and talking to friends and community groups. In some countries, such as Sweden and Denmark, the public debate alone has led to the stopping of planned nuclear expansions. In all countries the overwhelming majority of citizen actions has been of this sort. Such 'conventional' action has received, however, virtually no publicity.

It is only when concern expressed through conventional channels is ignored, and when promoters are particularly insensitive, that mass action in the form of civil disobedience becomes a favoured technique. Not surprisingly, demonstrations and occupations of nuclear sites have been most widespread where the governments are most authoritarian, namely in France and West Germany. In the US, by contrast,

legal channels have been especially favoured. However, the contrast is only one of degree; France, Germany and Japan have seen an enormous amount of local organising and court action, while a major use of civil disobedience has been taking place in Seabrook, New Hampshire in the US.

The demonstrations and occupations that have occurred have been overwhelmingly nonviolent. Often the demonstrators train in nonviolent techniques; for example, in West Germany, a large number of nonviolent action groups have sprung up in the last few years, studying the works and deeds of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others.

When violence does occur at demonstrations, it usually is caused or provoked by police, or may involve a minority of demonstrators acting in opposition to the main nonviolent protest. (The media rarely speak of the institutionalised violence promoted by the pro-nuclear forces: destruction of Aboriginal culture, deaths and deformities for future generations from radiation, increased risk of nuclear war and terrorist activity, and increased social and political repression to prevent terrorism and environmental disaster.)

Who are the anti-nuclear activists and why are they protesting? A solid component in almost every case is comprised of students and middle class profes-

sionals (especially scientists) who voice their concern mainly in terms of environmental issues such as disposal of radioactive waste. Another group consists of farmers, fishers, workers, tradespeople and others concerned mainly about the local impact of nuclear power stations on their own lives and their local environment; such a



constituency has been especially vocal in opposition in Western Europe and Japan.

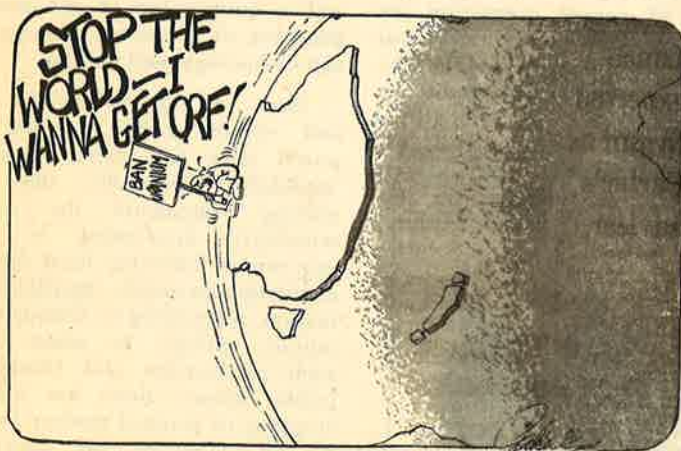
In the case of each of these groups, the reasons for opposition can be traced more fundamentally to the nature of nuclear power, the organisations that promote it, and the ideology that supports it. The opposition, although couched in terms of environmental protection, involves a challenge to centralised energy promoted by remote

decision makers. Furthermore, the anti-nuclear movement is becoming increasingly politicised in the focus of its opposition: at first emphasising safety and environmental issues, then proliferation and terrorism, it more and more concentrates on the social and political advantages of decentralised and renewable technologies.

The stereotype of the violent, politically motivated and tiny opposition to nuclear power more and more seems most appropriate for the pro-nuclear forces. It is obvious then how the media image of the anti-nuclear movement serves the establishment: it hopes to discredit a grass roots movement which opposed business and decision making as usual, and hopes to draw attention away from the way nuclear power serves vested interests, and reinforces existing economic and political relations in society. Fortunately, as more and more people come in contact with the opposition movement on a personal level, they will not only realise the falsity of the media stereotypes but also will become aware of the political nature of the anti-nuclear struggle itself.

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These three cartoons by Cook, Pickering and Tandberg on anti-uranium protest also nicely illustrate their attitude to the subject in general.



Pickering in 'The Australian', September 12, 1977.
Tandberg in 'The Age', September 6, 1977.
Cook in 'The National Times'.