

'76 French Strike at La Hague

Workers Fought For Lives At Nuke Plant

Michael Lucas

1977

From May to October of 1976 the workers of the La Hague nuclear reprocessing plant in France struck following what was euphemistically described as a radical “deterioration of working conditions” as a result of a shift from the reprocessing of conventional nuclear power plant fuel (graphite gas) to the reprocessing of spent fuel from light water reactors.

Redesigned to transform uranium fuel into plutonium fuel for fast breeder reactors, the plant is supposed to service not only the reactors of France, but those of the other European nuclear countries as well.

Previously hailed as an island of success in a sea of “technical difficulties” encountered in the plutonium fuel processing field, La Hague has now come to be referred to as “Condemned to Success,” in the words of one company executive giving vent to his and his colleagues’ amalgam of French impetuosity and atomic myopia.

Implicit in all the rhetoric spewed out from the plant was the unquestioned assumption that the technical and safety problems in the reprocessing cycle were already on their way to a final and very profitable solution. Despite the barrage of carefully manufactured favorable press about the success of La Hague, a closer look revealed simply another disgusting media blitz of gross falsifications and desperate lying.

As a result of the increase in cases of radioactive contamination in the operation of the plant, a number of serious accidents, work overloads and the management’s failure to adequately assure the technical functioning of the reprocessing equipment, the workers went on strike and demanded the overhaul of the entire installation, threatening to quit unless the demand was met. They further insisted that La Hague not be completely taken over by Cogema, the private firm operating the plant with the joint participation of the French government.

In a film about the strike entitled “Condemned to Success,” interviewed workers, farmers, housewives, union officials and doctors from the area detailed what amounts to another fearful unfinished episode in modern society’s nuclear horror film. A few of the more salient points included:

- the daily radioactive pollution of the ocean. La Hague was originally chosen as an “ideal” site for a reprocessing plant because of the exceptionally strong ocean currents that can carry the daily emitted radioactive waste out to sea.
- the pollution of the ground water system as well as, of course, the soil and atmosphere of the surrounding area. There are 9000 dairy cows in La Hague, all of which readily absorb the radioactive Strontium 90 that, in fact, had previously been contaminating the pastures of La Hague for over 10 years.
- the pipe system which carries radioactive liquid wastes out to sea sprung leaks not less than 17 times in the space of a few months.
- while the national average for new-born babies with spinal deformities is 1 in 6,000, the statistics for La Hague are 1 in 600.

- the steel and concrete structures housing the facilities and reprocessing equipment have weakened and corroded under the stress and strain of radioactive bombardment. To top it all off, the management had failed to carry out the minimum replacement of old equipment indirectly involved in the plutonium processing.

The film also points out that the workers at La Hague characterize themselves as kamikazes, the Japanese suicide pilots of World War II. Eight cases of leukemia have been reported amongst the workers; three of those workers have already died. The above-average unemployment figures of La Hague and the virtual certainty of unemployment for any worker who would dare to leave the area has played its backhand role in forcing the local inhabitants into job slots at the plant.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STRIKE

The strike at La Hague was one of the first European examples of workers' opposition to the nuclear project at an indispensable link in the production chain; the processing of fast breeder fuel without which the first generation of nuclear reactors cannot operate on a long-term basis due to the resulting scarcity and costliness of plutonium (not to mention politically derived restrictions on its export by possessor nations).

During the strike workers got together with local inhabitants. Collective demonstrations, public information meetings and exhibitions were organized. The question of pollution in general and radioactivity specifically were discussed both in terms of the latter's effects on workers in nuclear plants and on inhabitants in areas where atomic and reprocessing plants are located.

For the first time since the opening of the plant people engaged in a public inter-personal discussion over the immediate and long-range effects and the social consequences of the La Hague plant.

Despite assurances by management and the government and a security system that included a complete wardrobe of padded suits, insulated boots and oxygen masks, not to mention a small army of semi-automated robots, "glove boxes," glass cages, complicated dressing and undressing procedures, automatic sensing devices, special radioactivity detention teams, etc. ad nauseum and ad absurdum, the nuclear workers at La Hague were in no way able to escape radioactive exposure and its deadly consequences.

On the basis of the events at La Hague alone it is more than reasonable to assume that opposition on the part of workers who have to handle power plant radioactive materials—for storage or reprocessing can only quantitatively and qualitatively increase as the nuclear industry further develops throughout the world.

NUKES IN GENERAL

The strike at La Hague and the events that led up to it demonstrate that the European nuclear industry (no less than the American, in fact) is a long way from solving the health and environmental problems posed by atomic powered reactors, much less posing the social questions of health and environment.

With nuclear energy the technical "kinks" (such as workers falling sick with leukemia or the risk of unleashing radioactivity in amounts that kill or chronically maim 500,000 people) derive from the intrinsically inadaptability of nuclear electricity production to the human and natural environment. The further the nuclear industry progresses in its Frankenstein pursuit of turning dead labor into radioactive profit, the more the wastefulness of capitalist production exponentially rises, tendentially leading to the destruction of all forms of human labor power and of the ecological girdle and interplay of organic matter that has backgrounded the phenomenon of human life from the beginning of time.

The trillions of dollars of accumulated labor, not to mention the price-tagless, infinitely old, natural infrastructures of labor power that are being pegged for sacrifice on the altar of nuclear energy is capital's blindly conceived and blindly executed solution to what it desperately wants to see as nothing more serious than its "energy" problem. In its attempt to show the world that it can juggle the ecological laws of atomic particles just as arbitrarily

as it strives to manhandle human beings, it has in fact renounced all claims to rationally managing social production and ecological reproduction at a point in society's production in which these two have become mutually and inseparably dependent on one another.

In the development of all previously existing capitalist technologies it was always possible—by one coercive means or another—to bring about the adjustment of the worker to the productive functioning of the means of production. At worst the individual worker died under his or her subjugation. With nuclear energy it is not only the individual who is threatened, but the collective worker and the collective being of humanity—all people and all life. In its final stage of development, capitalism poses the destruction of all classes in an apotheosis of annihilation.

Governments, police forces and not a few revolutionaries will be, or are already, asking themselves how the anti-nuclear movement has grown so rapidly into an international mass campaign. Its sudden outcropping is surprising only to those who cannot see that nuclear power plants and the logic of their development (fathered by the nuclear militancy politics of World War II and its Cold War aftermath) are not an aberration of the system or its momentary slip into madness, but are rooted in and are specific to the present stage of world capitalism.

Pollution and the destruction of the environment; the ever-increasing drive to repress the human being as the essential means and end of all material production; the down-grading of working conditions through rationalization, unemployment, sickness and boredom; the systematic imposition of stupidity, separation and lacklove; the destruction of public services through cost-cutting; the development of a whole range of physical, chemical and social technologies that are rapidly proving themselves lethally incompatible with the human species; the concentration of the means of production and labor power to create vast monopolistic complexes that can gobble up and freeze immense sectors of the global economy for generations to come; the creation of an industrial system that combines within itself profit-making uncontrolled by competition and political military blackmail on a super-terrestrial scale; the creation of a real-life global laboratory for capitalists and bureaucrats to threaten each other with the bio-military destruction of the world...-These are the historical tendencies of capital behind the development of the nuclear industry and which have permeated every pore in the life of modern society for the last 30 years.

But let's be clear. This development also describes the process by which capital has unavoidably scattered the seeds of revolution far and deep in the sedimented layers of social misery and dissatisfaction. If the anti-nuclear movement has stepped forth onto the universal stage of class struggle it is the result of the 20th century fall-out of modern capital of which radioactivity is only a diffuse, poignant, deadly sign.

And unlike the movements that were born in the 1960s—the student movement; the women's and men's sexual-social liberation movements; the third world independence struggles; the reformist and revolutionary ecological and health currents; the revolt against work inside and outside the factories—the anti-nuclear movement is a response to capitalist development as a whole and not to a "one-issue" abuse to which the politically naive defenders of the movement, liberal apologists of the system and not a few "revolutionaries" will try to reduce it.

Like the movements of the sixties, but in a more developed and historically more mature form, the anti-nuclear movement is a mass development in which the fight for an ecologically sound system of production and reproduction and the struggle for the abolition of all status quo relations of working and living are undergoing their first groping phase of combining and in doing so posing the question of social revolution in its specifically modern form.

fifth Estate

Michael Lucas
'76 French Strike at La Hague
Workers Fought For Lives At Nuke Plant
1977

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/286-september-1977/76-french-strike-at-la-hague>
Fifth Estate #286, September, 1977

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)