

THE CROSS WE HAVE TO BEAR



NOTES

sharply attacked for some years for failing to enforce adequate safety standards, and anti-nuclear power scientists have charged the NRC with suppressing expert reports which have indicated modifications and improvements in accident prevention. In the past month, the NRC has cancelled operating licences for several reactors, some already underway, which are inadequately safeguarded against earthquakes. The Harrisburg plant has been having operating problems for months. The NRC has been aware of this and safeguards have not been taken, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists who listed 17 major safety problems which apply to this type of reactor, which is cooled by pressurised water. They were sharply critical of the attempt by the authorities to reassure the public and of claims that no-one would be hurt.

At the moment the reactor is slowly cooling down. Sensors in federal government helicopters circling overhead have picked up persistent signs of radioactivity. State officials admitted that at least eight reactor workers had been exposed, and expressed some concern about radioactive iodine, which can accumulate through direct inhalation or through drinking contaminated milk. 'Fortunately,' the lieutenant-governor of Pennsylvania told the press, 'we don't believe the risk is significant because dairy cows are on stored feed at this time of year.'

This attitude may boomerang on officials. A year ago spokesmen for the power industry were saying that an accident like this could not happen here, and they dismissed as scare propaganda the new film, *China Syndrome*, which depicts a severe meltdown accident in a California reactor. Released a month ago, the film is playing to enormous audiences. As one White House official concluded, it is going to be 'very difficult' for the President to turn to nuclear reactors to save his energy policy now.

Meanwhile, in Britain . . .

Duncan Campbell adds: The Harrisburg incident is a discomforting reminder of the determination of the British nuclear industry to import the American PWR (Pressurised Water Reactor, as at Harrisburg) design to Britain. Their decade long campaign has so far been successfully resisted despite intense industry and civil service pressure.

Britain has not installed, or ordered, any PWRs, which are increasingly suspected of inherent safety defects. A decision to reject PWR in favour of an indigenous design was taken by Eric Varley in 1974. But that design, the SGHWR (Steam Generating Heavy Water Reactor) came to grief by 1977. The nuclear industry was not unduly sorrowful at its demise, and awaited a recasting of the decision by Varley's successor, Tony Benn. The PWR lobby sought not just the one or two orders then being considered, but also asked that the entire reactor ordering programme up to 1990 be committed to PWRs. Safety problems, they assured, had been resolved, and it was to be the design for the future, round the world. Moreover, the PWR lobby argued, the Shah of Iran might well buy his planned 'string of PWRs' from Britain, if we played our cards right and got stuck into the PWR business. The lobby included the Energy Department's senior civil servants, as well as Sir Kenneth Berrill and the Think Tank, Sir Arnold Weinstock and the UK Atomic Energy Authority. Their less-than-accurate advice was not taken however; Benn ordered only two reactors, both to be British designed AGRs (Advanced Gas Cooled reactors), although a new 'study' of PWR was to be undertaken. The industry has not given up however; as recently as December a new PWR consortium was formed, RNC (Nuclear) Ltd, led by Sir Kenneth Keith and

Rolls-Royce.

The nuclear lobby's attitude to the Harrisburg disaster has yet to be fully crafted. But it is worth noting that the chairman of the UKAEA, Sir John Hill, has yet to apologise to the exiled Russian biochemist Dr Zhores Medvedev, for dismissing his account of the 1957 Urals nuclear accident as 'rubbish', 'science fiction,' and a 'figment of the imagination'. Not only has Medvedev's account been borne out by the disclosure of CIA records and the interviewing of other witnesses who have left the USSR, but Energy Secretary Tony Benn, in a speech earlier this year, revealed that '(the accident) was known at the time . . . I believe, to the Atomic Energy Authority . . . but I understand that the Cabinet was not informed'.

If his response to Medvedev's disclosure is a measure of Sir John's attention to inconvenient detail, we may find the Atomic Energy Authority's map does not show Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Narrow gauge finances

Christopher Hird writes: It is mainly the government who are to blame for the possibility that British Rail may have to increase their fares again this autumn by 10 per cent. The cash limits system which the government uses to control British Rail's spending effectively prevents BR from using past years' surpluses to fund this year's loss.

The main source of government finance for BR is the Public Service Obligation grant - negotiated each year with the government as the 'contract price' for providing the passenger rail service. For the sake of prudence BR chief Peter Parker agrees a PSO about 10 per cent below the cash limit. If BR keep below the PSO they can pocket 60 per cent of the saving. In past years they have managed to