Challenging the nuclear future

Philip Webber and Stuart Parkinson summarise the recent developments surrounding nuclear weapons and nuclear power in the UK.

In recent months, nuclear issues have climbed to the top of the political agenda. And as we write this, the UK government is dropping strong hints that it would like to retain both nuclear weapons and nuclear power as part of the nation’s future.

The decision on whether to renew Britain’s Trident nuclear weapons will be taken at the latest before the next general election. But there are signs that preparations for renewal have started already. The funding for the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) at Aldermaston has been increasing over the last couple of years, and now construction work has begun on a new high power laser facility (‘Orion’) with a new supercomputer (‘Larch’) to be installed this summer1. Meanwhile, as ministers deny any decision has been taken, the government refuses to commit to a parliamentary vote on the issue. The level of democratic accountability was further brought into question when the Ministry of Defence refused to provide evidence to the Defence Select Committee on the issue2. Campaigners have consequently stepped up their protests at the AWE and Faslane naval base in Scotland (where the nuclear submarines are based), only to find that the new Terrorism Act is being used to restrict their activities3.

Critics, including SGR (see p.3), have pointed out that any renewal of the Trident system would seriously undermine our international obligations under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires us to pursue nuclear disarmament. This is especially problematic as we try to convince Iran, North Korea and others to abide by the safeguards laid down under that treaty by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Continued on p.8...

Preliminary announcement

SGR conference and AGM 2006
21 October
University of London Union

This year’s conference will discuss case studies of where science, design and technology are making a positive contribution to peace, social justice and environmental sustainability. The event will include keynote speakers and workshops.

Full details will be sent to all members closer to the event, but please make a note in your diaries now. Updates on the event details will appear on the SGR website soon.
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...continued from front page

On nuclear power, a formal decision is imminent on whether to opt for a new generation of power stations. With the failure to cut carbon dioxide emissions since Labour came to power and the gradual decommissioning of current nuclear and coal plants over the next two decades, the government has carried out another energy review (the second in the space of 15 years). It will be followed by a comprehensive report in March which will be published in April, to similar conclusions, pointing out that nuclear power stations require a whole series of special financial, security, economics, availability of uranium ore, and the inflexibility of nuclear power generation.

April also saw the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the world’s worst industrial accident. The anniversary was marked by intense debate over the human and environmental impacts, in particular the number of deaths caused by the accident. The Chernobyl Forum (an international body led by the IAEA initially claimed only 4,000 deaths would result, although this figure was later revised to 9,000. Other studies argued the figures were much higher. For example, the International Agency for Research on Cancer estimated 16,000 while Greenpeace claimed that it was in the region of 93,000.

The debate on nuclear issues will continue to intensify and SGR will continue to add its voice.

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Notes and references

1. Atomic Weapons Establishment (2006), http://www.awe.co.uk/ (viewed 18/05/06)
3. http://www.guardian.co.uk/