Europe's nuclear debate (2)

Germany: growing acrimony

Werner Gries looks at the controversy over the use of nuclear power in West Germany

THE row in West Germany over the peaceful use of nuclear energy has grown increasingly fierce over the past few months. It reached its latest climax on 19 February with the siege of the nuclear power station at Brokdorf, where scores of people were detained by the police after a clash with militant demonstrators who tried to occupy the power station site. A similar demonstration last November, also at Brokdorf, was also violent. Meetings held all over the country to discuss the necessity for nuclear energy at all have produced clashes between supporters and opponents of nuclear power. The press, radio and television have busied themselves conducting detailed investigation into the pros and cons of the issue.

The result of all this activity, in some eyes at least, is little result at all. In spite of the wave of anti-nuclear demonstrations, a recent opinion poll indicates that a slight majority of the population is in favour of the construction of nuclear power stations. In an all-party resolution last year, the Bundestag (parliament) declared itself unanimously in favour of the continued use of nuclear energy so that West Germany's future energy supplies could be guaranteed; the Ministers President of the Länder (provinces of the federal republic) followed suit. Such agreement at government level, though, has not prevented various branches of the Social Democratic party calling for a halt to the building of nuclear stations; in some cases they have organised joint demonstrations with local people to protest against new plants. All political parties are involved in the debate, and each has in its ranks both supporters and opponents of nuclear power—the governing coalition of Social Democrats and Free Democrats displays more disagreement than the opposition Christian Democrats and Christian Socialists.

Federal complications

Additional complications have sprung from the country's federal framework. Individual Länder, for example, are responsible for authorising nuclear power stations in their own areas. Several local courts have granted injunctions to stop the building of new plants because of protests by private citizens. In Schleswig-Holstein, a court ruled that work on the Brokdorf nuclear power station could not start until a way of disposing of the waste had been agreed on, and in mid-February a

court in Rhineland-Palatinate banned further work on the Müllheim-Karlich station near Coblenz because of technical errors in the construction. The government of North Rhine-Westphalia has banned the building of all new power stations within its area until a method of waste disposal is agreed. Some sites have been brought to a standstill, others have experienced partial stoppages; at some sites it has not even been possible to begin the construction work.

One of the major obstacles to have arisen to the expanded use of nuclear power has focused on the reprocessing and storage of radioactive waste. Although the importance of the problem was recognised when West Germany first began using nuclear energy, the necessary political measures to deal with it were not set in motion. What is more, after 1980 it may not be possible for West German fuel elements to be reprocessed in France or Great Britain. In both countries there is growing opposition to the expansion of reprocessing capacity, especially for foreign fuel. Germany's present contracts run out in 1979.

Faced with this problem, the West German government has resolved to authorise the building of new power stations only if the safe disposal of fuel elements can be guaranteed from the start. It has plans for a *entsorgungszentrum* ('service centre'), which could reprocess the fuel elements from all West German nuclear power plants and store the radioactive waste products in salt deposits for hundreds of years. The site chosen for the centre is Niedersachsen, but a fierce argument has flared up locally which may have far reaching effects on the construction of nuclear power stations in other parts of West Germany. Yet unless the service centre can be established, the expansion of West Germany's nuclear power capacity will be halted. Government leaders and the opposition therefore feel that they must jointly take steps to ensure that a centre is built.

Overtaking Britain

At the end of 1976, 13 nuclear stations were in operation in West Germany, with a total output of 6,500 MW. West Germany has overtaken Britain in terms of nuclear power capacity and is the leading user of nuclear energy in the EEC. A further 17 nuclear power stations are proposed, some of which are already under construction. There

were plans for 50 by 1985, with a total capacity of approximately 45,000 MW, but because of the recent public protests the construction of some planned nuclear power stations has been postponed in certain areas, and this figure now seems utopian. Experts now believe that about another 25 stations will be operational by 1985, with a total capacity of approximately 22,000 MW.

The government believes that the country faces an electricity shortage in the 1980s and in spite of the current difficulties, large scale research is going on to develop more advanced reactors. Some DM2,000 million each year are allocated for nuclear energy research, mainly for developing a fast breeder and a high temperature reactor. For many years there has been bitter argument over the necessity for the fast breeder, and this has grown even more bitter during the past few months. It remains doubtful whether an acceptable site can be found, and the special security problems make it more unlikely that the public will ever accept it.

Compared to the internal difficulties, discussion of Germany's role in international trade in nuclear technology has been comparatively limited. The controversial deal with Brazil, providing eight nuclear power stations, a reprocessing plant and an enrichment plant by 1990, was originally welcomed by all parties in the Bundestag, and the government and opposition still agree that it is necessary. The Carter Administration is objecting to the reprocessing and enrichment plants because it fears they will provide Brazil with the raw materials for an atomic bomb, and has endeavoured to pressure Brazil too. With reports now of US hold-ups in supplies of enriched uranium to West Germany, nothing is certain, but the general public seems to accept that the West German-Brazilian treaty should be adhered to in its original form. Their more immediate concern is with the domestic implications of a domestic programme. And that concern is likely to be fuelled still further in the future. □

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

Demo at Brokdorf