

The State and Chernobyl

It is now four years since the disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor on April 26, 1986. Information about its consequences is now becoming available in spite of attempts by the Russian government to prevent knowledge leaking out into the public domain. *Glasnost* may be Gorbachov's policy in most things but not where Chernobyl was concerned. The scale of the disaster is far greater than has been supposed till now.

A significant feature of this disaster is that it was partly caused, and to a large extent made worse, by state secrecy. For instance, it was the state's obsessional secrecy on all matters nuclear which meant that the reactor's operators were not allowed to know that withdrawal of all the control rods could cause an explosion. All they were told was that this was "forbidden" (*New Scientist*, 11 November 1989).

Similarly, it was a military secret that a previous graphite fire had occurred, in 1958, at Kyshtym in the Urals. Not only did the Chernobyl management and engineers know nothing of this (except what had leaked back to them from the West), but again according to the *New Scientist* "those who had dealt with it were not called to Chernobyl until three weeks after the accident". During those weeks a lot of harm was done. Fruitless attempts to douse the fire were unsuccessful, only resulting in contamination of the watertable. Meanwhile radioactive material continued to escape into the atmosphere.

Political considerations led Gorbachov, in his TV statement about Chernobyl 18 days after the accident, to allege that the western media had lied and exaggerated the scale and nature of the disaster with their claims that there would be "thousands of casualties" (quoted in Frederick Polil's novel, *Chernobyl*, 1987). This was part of the cover-up agreed to by the politbureau and recently exposed by Gorbachov's opponent, Boris Yeltsin.

This cover-up involved misleading the people at risk so that many of these within Russia believed themselves to be safe. Chernobyl is in the north of the Ukraine, very close to the southern border of Byelorussia and not far from the border, to the east, with Russia proper. The plume of radioactive particles drifted north and east, and seriously contaminated a large part of Byelorussia and adjacent provinces of Russia.

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The original disaster was bad enough. What made it worse was misinformation, the attempt to pretend that the only areas at risk were within a neat, circular, 18 mile (30 km) "exclusion zone". The result of this official policy was that people have still not been evacuated from many seriously contaminated areas. In the week after the disaster, official policy decreed that "communities were left to rot in ignorance...". Over the border, in Russia proper, people "were very frightened. They were not told. They had to guess Nobody knew what was happening. Burly peasants were collapsing in the fields" (*Sunday Times*, 29 April 1990).

The cover-up meant that the May Day parades were ordered to proceed, in Kiev and Minsk, as though everything was normal. Thousands of schoolchildren were thus exposed to radioactive open air. It also meant a delay even in evacuating Pripyat, the nearest town to Chernobyl. It is now thought that 4 million people are living with

radiation, including 34,000 in areas very seriously contaminated. Yury Cherbak, a Ukrainian Green politician, claims that 85 villages in Byelorussia, 19 in the Ukraine and 14 in Russia should be urgently evacuated (*The Independent on Sunday*, 22 April 1990). In these unevacuated areas, where people are still growing food crops, not only are they eating the contaminated food they grow but, according to the *Sunday Times* again, "Soviet trade officials collected it and distributed it in Moscow, Kazakhstan and elsewhere".

Now, four years later, the consequences of Chernobyl are becoming apparent. Children are suffering from leukaemia or cancer of the thyroid. There are a number of babies born with serious congenital abnormalities, a disaster similar to but worse than that caused by thalidomide in Britain or Agent Orange in Vietnam. In Byelorussia, over 2 million people are at risk, one-fifth of the population. Yet in the capital city, Minsk, there are no ultrasonic scanners (essential for diagnosis and treatment of leukaemia) or intensive care units. Medicines, even for pain relief, are in short supply. The authorities have decreed, harshly, that no treatment at all, not even for pain relief, be given to terminal cases. In the West, leukaemia cases have an 85 percent chance of survival. There, they only have a 15 percent chance.

Acute food shortages mean that children are not getting a proper diet. They die of quite common illnesses, with their immune system weakened by radiation. Experts claim that "it is not 'Chernobyl Aids' that kills them, it is the lack of proper food" (*Sunday Times*).

The state showed its "concern" in February 1988 by decreeing the sort of information which should be made available to the media. The increased incidence of anaemia, hypertension and hyperplasia of the thyroid was hushed up as a result of "official policy", and there was to be no mention of any "loss of physical capacity for work or professional skills" (*New Scientist*, 28 October 1989). Who was the state trying to protect?

Delay and Disinformation

The role of the state in this disaster has been to make things worse: the delay in issuing warnings, the misinformation as to which areas were at risk, the suppression of information on the deaths and diseases related to or caused by Chernobyl, the refusal to allow scientists to do research, the publication of underestimates of the amount of radiation released, the refusal to arrange for evacuation from areas known to be contaminated, the despatch of contaminated foodstuff from these regions to uncontaminated regions, the lack of provision of decent medical facilities, the secrecy surrounding the lessons learnt earlier at Kyshtym - the state and its officials bear a heavy load of responsibility for this massive catastrophe and its (too-often avoidable) tragic consequences.

Probably this is the worst environmental disaster the world has yet seen. Large areas of land are uninhabitable yet in many of these people are still living - living a nightmare. In one village, in a single year, 30 babies were born with serious deformities.

The danger to humanity, and to the planet, of continuing to allow capitalist priorities - production of cheap, rather than safe, energy - and capitalist political structures - such

as rule by a Party hierarchy, determined to control the information released to the population under its rule - this is the lesson of Chernobyl. The land is poisoned with pollution, the forest trees produce abnormal mutated growths, and the watertable is polluted. On the farms cows give birth to deformed calves, in the villages young women dread giving birth to monsters. Children are not allowed out of doors except to go to and from school.

Genetic mutation is a high price to pay for the government's mistakes, for cheap electricity for export to Poland and Rumania, and for plutonium for the military, a by-product of the Chernobyl reactor. It is a price being paid partly because the world has trusted technical experts too much. There were experts in the Ukraine who claimed that Chernobyl's four reactors were totally safe. After the accident Britain's best-known expert on nuclear power, Lord Marshall, asserted that the risk from radiation inside the exclusion zone (less than 20 miles away from Chernobyl itself) was "no worse than smoking a couple of cigarettes a year" (*Observer*, 4 May 1986).

The likes of Lord Marshall have been making reassuring noises in the Soviet Union and doing their best to prevent doctors and scientists revealing the truth about Chernobyl's legacy, Gorbachov's *glasnost* did not apply in this special case. So long as society's class divisions mean the necessity for the continued existence of states and national governments, and so long as production is for profit not for use, the danger of continuing to use such extremely risky technology will be too great - the victims are already too many.

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