



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Basque citizens end construction of Lemoniz Nuclear Power Plant, 1976-1978

- Anti-Nuclear Power Movement (1960s-1980s)

Time period notes: *The campaign became associated with the ETA, a terrorist Basque nationalist group in 1977, and the movement became increasingly radicalized and violent.*

May
1976
to: March
1978

Country: Spain

Location City/State/Province: Lemoniz

Goals:

To stop the construction and operation of the Lemoniz Nuclear Power Plant

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 004. Signed public statements
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 004. Signed public statements
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Environment

Group characterization:

- Basque nationalists
- Environmentalists
- local council members
- residents

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Comision de Defensa de una Costa Vasca no Nuclear

Partners:

Anti-nuclear Committee

External allies:

The Environmental Group, Conscientious Objectors, ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna)

Involvement of social elites:

Eduardo Chillida

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Comision de Defensa de una Costa Vasca no Nuclear
- Eduardo Chillida

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Conscientious Objectors
- The Environmental Group

Groups in 4th Segment:

- ETA

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Anti-nuclear Committee

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 4 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

General Basque Council, Iberduero Basque utility company

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

The campaign split into different factions once the ETA became involved and started using violent tactics to stop the Lemoniz Power Plant. While some parts of the group radicalized and supported the ETA, others in the campaign disapproved of the attacks and held a general strike against the ETA.

Repressive Violence:

There are many reports of police violence and jailing of the protesters.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

0 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign turned into a violent struggle led by the ETA.

The construction of the Lemoniz Nuclear Power Plant started in the 1970s, as the power company Iberduero Basque Utility planned to build several nuclear plants on the Basque coast. There had been an international oil crisis during the time, and the effect of the oil shortage had huge detrimental consequences for the Spanish economy. The central government was interested in investing in alternative energy such as nuclear power. The central planning of the Lemoniz power plant began in 1972 when the government gave provisional approval to build a nuclear power plant in Lemoniz. Iberduero planned on building two nuclear units of 930MW each that would become operational as Lemoniz in 1976 and Lemoniz II in 1978. Iberduero also planned to build three more nuclear power plants in Basque Country, in Punta Endat, Ogella, and Bergara.

However, from the beginning, the construction was opposed by a large popular movement from the residents and local council members in the area. As well as ecological and health dangers, civilians were worried about the crowding of existing residents near the plant. Leftwing nationalist Basque organizations such as Euskadiko Ezkerra and Herri Batasuna also opposed the building of the power plant.

The anti-nuclear movement in Basque County was strong and many communities protested the building of nuclear power plants by Iberduero. The movement gained the support of famous Spanish Basque sculptor, Eduardo Chillida. In 1975, he designed a sticker that became a symbol of the antinuclear Basques emblazoned with the phrase, “Ez, ez, ez, zentral nuklearrik ez” (“No, no, no, not a nuclear power station” - approximate).

In the May of 1976, the group called the “Comision de Defensa de una costa Vasca no Nuclear” (“Defense Commission of a non-nuclear Basque coast”) formed to oppose the new power plant. The group was made up of representatives from different parts of the community such as the Association of Families of Lekeitio, Association of Parents of Mungia, Families Association of Ea, and other groups from surrounding municipalities of Lemoniz.

By July 3, the Commission delivered 150,000 signatures to the Provincial Council of Bizkaia, demanding the immediate halt of the nuclear power plant and criticizing the central government as well as the provincial council. On August 29, the group staged a march with more than 50,000 people participating by walking from Plentzia to Gorniz. Some slogans used in the campaign were “For a non-nuclear Basque coast”, “For public control of our environment”, and “For public participation in the design of our country”. Police monitored the march from helicopters. On October 14 of that year, a large majority of the residents of Mungia and Lemoniz signed a written legal statement that the Lemoniz nuclear power plant was illegal, dangerous for the community, and construction should be stopped.

After a series of informational meetings on the dangers of nuclear power, the civil governor of Vizcaya prohibited some of the local meetings. People frustrated with the passivity of the City Councils of Lemoniz and Mungia announced the initiation of administrative proceedings against the municipalities to prevent the nuclear power plant’s construction. In 1977, groups—including the Commission, Official College of Basque Country and Navarre Architects, Biscay AAVV and Families, environmental groups (6,000 signatures), and Mungia (3,000) and Lekeitio (1,000) residents—petitioned the County Council to stop the plant. On May 21, el Grupo Ecologista (The Environmental Group) and Objetores de Conciencia (Conscientious Objectors) passed out pamphlets opposing the Lemoniz power plant at a general meeting of shareholders of Iberduero.

While the campaign had so far been nonviolent, the ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna), a terrorist Basque separatist organization, joined in the campaign and began to use violent tactics to oppose the power plant. The ETA gained much public support for their Basque nationalism that emphasized the mythical return of the Basque people to their primitive roots, which was also ideologically associated with the environmental movement. Their first action was on June 3rd, 1977, when some members entered the nuclear plant and destroyed one of the vessels. In December, the organization attacked Lemoniz again, resulting in the wounding of Civil Guard and the paralyzing of Lemoniz construction. From late 1977 until 1981, the ETA would engage in increasingly violent attacks from destruction of property, bombings, and kidnappings that set back construction. While parts of the movement became increasingly radical in support of the ETA, other segments did not approve of the violent actions and general outcry and an anti-ETA strike occurred after the ETA kidnapped and killed the chief engineer, Jose Ryan, of the Lemoniz power plant in 1981.

In June, the Commission requested to hold a demonstration in Bilbao protesting the nuclear power plant from the civil government. The government denied the request, but by June 26 reported that the demonstration would be allowed. On June 14, 1977, more than 150,000 Basques led by the Commission and other agencies protested in Bilbao to stop the construction in Lemoniz. A local newspaper described the event as the biggest demonstration in Basque Country since the postwar period.

On February 12, 1978, an anti-nuclear demonstration of 4,000 people in Mungia resulted in arrests of 40 people at City Hall. Forty groups and agencies in Madrid at the initiative of the Assembly of Basque city, signed a document opposing Lemoniz and other nuclear power plants on February 15. The Commission and the Anti-nuclear Committee delivered a letter to the president of the newly created GCS (General Basque Council) asking for a stoppage of work on the power plant, denial of any permits for nuclear power plants, opening an investigation of illegalities in Lemoniz, and beginning a process of debate and information to the community about nuclear power. However, the president Rubial declared that nuclear power offered economic security to Basque Country and would be beneficial. He did not respond to the Commission's challenges to a public debate about the issue.

Anti-nuclear demonstrations were rampant in Basque Country, with violent attacks from the ETA also becoming more regular. Protesters held demonstrations, sit-ins, lock-ins, marches, and hunger strikes. On March 12, the Commission and Antinuclear Committee organized more than 100,000 people to march to Troka (a mile away from Lemoniz) despite rain and a tense police presence. Police flew in helicopters over the area and stayed in jeeps holding machine guns. By the end of March, the Commission delivered a comprehensive report to the GCS on the legal arguments against nuclear power and also offered a list of actions that should be undertaken.

By 1981, the death of head engineer Ryan resulted in the de-facto stop of work at Lemoniz power plant. Iberduero then officially stopped the works in 1983 partly due to the violent attacks from ETA, the huge popular disapproval of the project, and the waning support from the central government.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

For more information on the anti-nuclear movement see Bill Moyer. Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2001.

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