Mass occupation of proposed Wyhl nuclear power plant site in Germany, 1974-1977

- Anti-Nuclear Power Movement (1960s-1980s) [1]
- included participation by more than one social class [2]

Timing

Time period notes:
Although the occupation of the site ended in late 1975, the legal process of stopping construction did not end until March 1977.

January 1974 to November 1975

Location and Goals

Country: Germany
Location City/State/Province: Wyhl, Baden-Wurttemberg
Location Description: Southwest corner of Germany

Goals:
Specifically, to stop construction of the Wyhl nuclear power plant. More broadly, to eliminate nuclear energy production in Germany.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 038. Marches: Six kilometer long procession through Wyhl

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 004. Signed public statements
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 044. Mock funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 051. Walk-outs
- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Popular university with classes on nuclear power and nonviolent action

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Popular university with classes on nuclear power and nonviolent action

Methods in 6th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 048. Protest meetings
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Popular university with classes on nuclear power and nonviolent action

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 050. Teach-ins

Segment Length:
Approximately 4 months
Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- Protestant church members
- anti-nuclear activists
- farmers
- scientists
- vintners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Not identified.
Partners:
European Environmental Bureau, World Information Service for Energy, Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz (The Association of Citizens' Environmental Protection)
External allies:
Protestant Church
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups
Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bundesverband Bürgerinitiativen Umweltschutz (The Association of Citizens’ Environmental Protection)
- European Environmental Bureau
- Protestant Church
- World Information Service for Energy

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
Approximately 4 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Badenwerk AG - nuclear utility company, German government
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Throughout the campaign, the state government disseminated information on nuclear safety and the need for nuclear energy in Germany. Letters were also sent to residents before the referendum vote in 1975, warning them of the potential consequences of their vote against the project. Additionally, Badenwerk AG promised the community a pool, a sports center and other community projects.

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
Not known

Success Outcome
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Total points:
8 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:
Although some protesters hoped to halt all nuclear power production in Germany, this was not accomplished until March 2011 when Germany took its remaining 8 plants offline after the Fukushima disaster in Japan.

Due in part to the OPEC energy crisis in the 1970s, Germany began a transition to greater nuclear energy production. Demand for electricity was projected to grow by seven percent annually and the state’s solution was the construction of eight nuclear plants by 1990. Citizens in communities that were determined suitable for the building of a nuclear facility were worried about the potential dangers of nuclear energy – low-level radiation, the risk of a catastrophic disaster, the disposal of radioactive waste and other environmental impacts due to the construction and operation of the plant. When the government of Baden-Wurttemberg announced plans to build a nuclear power plant, residents mobilized against the plan, proclaiming, “Better active today than radioactive tomorrow!” In September 1972, farmers, encouraged by environmental and anti-nuclear activists, organized demonstrations in the area and 60,000 residents signed a petition. In some communities, over ninety percent of the adult population voiced opposition to the plant. At a public hearing in the fall of 1972, the government chose to abandon the location. Unfortunately for the people of Wyhl, Germany, another community was selected for construction of a nuclear facility.

At the beginning of 1973, the government agreed to sell land to Badenwerk AG, a nuclear utility company that was proposing to build a nuclear power plant in Wyhl. Aware that this deal could lead to similar opposition from residents as had been seen in Baden, the government acted preemptively to bolster support for the plant. Residents received a monthly brochure with information on nuclear safety and the growing energy needs of Germany. The state minister president even stated that “without nuclear energy, the lights will go out in 1980”. Anti-nuclear activists, environmentalists, and local residents reacted with a six-kilometer long procession to Wyhl in 1974. Farmers and wine growers in the area formed alliances with international organizations that were opposing nuclear energy plants in Germany, France, and Switzerland, such as the European Environmental Bureau and the World Information Service for Energy.

After forming a coalition with a local hunting association, activists were able to hire scientists to study the
environmental impacts of the plant. Researchers at the University of Freiburg determined that the cooling towers would lead to greater fog accumulation, which could have negative ramifications for local agriculture. The scientists built a weather observation tower to study the effects on the microclimate and determined that the high demand for water used by the plant’s cooling system would lower the local water table and harm nearby forests and a drinking-water reservoir. After a notice of the plant’s construction appeared in an official journal in 1974, eight communes, fifty associations and 330 individuals declared their formal opposition to the plant. Additionally, 90,000 people signed a collective objection statement. A Battelle Institute poll revealed that seventy-five percent of the local population opposed the plant.

As required by the Atomic Energy Act of 1959, the state held a public hearing on the plant at which residents should have been allowed to voice any concerns they had about the plant. Citizens complained that the chairman of the hearings was biased because the government was a partial owner of the Badenwerk AG utility company. On the second day of the hearings in June 1974, citizens left the hearing in protest, carrying a coffin with the following inscription: “The Death of Democracy?”. The Protestant Church was a major supporter of the opposition because of the lack of public participation in the plant’s planning stage and the government’s criminalization of antinuclear protest. Additionally, twenty-two scientists from Freiburg signed a statement that listed the ecological and health risks associated with the plant. A referendum at the beginning of 1975 showed a slight majority (fifty-five percent vs. forty-three percent) supported the sale of land to the utility company. Again citizens complained of bias in the government as letters had been sent to all residents threatening them with expropriation if they voted against the proposal. A partial construction license was issued to Badenwerk to begin building the nuclear plant in early 1975. In response, 3,000 people met in Weisweil and four municipalities in the area decided to use legal action as another means of stopping the plant. The courts recommended that construction should be suspended until official complaints could be examined, but Badenwerk continued working on the site.

In February 1975, 20,000-30,000 people demonstrated and then occupied the construction site. The massive ten-month long occupation attracted international attention and support from numerous anti-nuclear activists in Europe. Environmentalists, anti-nuclear activists, local farmers and residents, as well as some more radical political elements came together to oppose the plant, stating, “When justice is turned into injustice, to resist becomes an obligation”. The thousands occupying the site used slogans, banners, posters and costumes to show their opposition to the plant. Activists also founded a popular university at Wyhl with more than sixty courses, lectures, and discussions on environmental protection, democracy, and the right to protest. Both pro- and anti-nuclear lecturers were invited to speak and many scientists spoke out against the plant despite the risk of losing their jobs at state universities. Mass meetings were held at the site with thousands of people in attendance. There are some media reports of local police refusing to take part in the occasionally rough treatment of the protesters.

In March 1975, the government responded by suspending the partial construction license although the utility company tried unsuccessfully to appeal this decision. At the beginning of 1976, the government guaranteed that construction would not restart until all complaints had been heard and a final court decision had been reached. The occupation of the site was ended, and in March 1977 the administrative court decided to ban construction, although they claimed it was because of insufficiencies in the design plan, not because of opposition from civil society.

**Research Notes**

Influences:
The campaign against the Wyhl nuclear plant was part of a broader movement against nuclear power in Europe and the United States, and this campaign was influenced by and also contributed to other campaigns, especially in terms of using legal/court-room action to oppose particular sites. Examples of later campaigns include the Clamshell Alliance and the Abalone Alliance, both in the United States. (1,2). The success of the campaign was also important in the birth of the Green Party (Die Grünen) in Germany, which called for an end to nuclear power, amongst other environmental and social changes. (2)

Sources:


Additional Notes:

Anti-nuclear protest in Germany began to use more direct (and often violent) confrontation after their success at Wyhl because the Germany government determined that the civil disobedience (occupation of the site) used in this campaign would no longer be tolerated and police force was used to suppress opposition.


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