U.S. anti-nuclear activists campaign against restarting Three Mile Island nuclear generator, 1979-1985

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

March 1979 to October 1985

**Country:** United States  
**Location City/State/Province:** Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania  
**Location Description:** Site of nuclear power plant

**Goals:**
1. That all operations at Three Mile Island be permanently closed.
2. For the utility companies’ stockholders to assume the costs arising from the nuclear accident.
4. Removal of U.S. Energy Secretary James Schlesinger

**Methods**

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 015. Group lobbying
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 162. Sit-in

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 015. Group lobbying
- 034. Vigils
• 038. Marches

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 015. Group lobbying
• 023. Destruction of own property
• 038. Marches
• 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments

Methods in 4th segment:

• 015. Group lobbying

Methods in 5th segment:

• 015. Group lobbying

Methods in 6th segment:

• 015. Group lobbying
• 016. Picketing
• 038. Marches
• 171. Nonviolent interjection

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Group characterization:

• anti-nuclear activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Three Mile Island Alert

Partners:
Not known.

External allies:
Union of Concerned Scientists, United Automobile Workers, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, the United Mine Workers, the International Longshoremen, the United Food and Commercial Workers, National Education
Association, the Labor Committee for Safe Energy and Full Employment, Concerned Pennsylvanians United, American Friends Service Committee, and Movement for a New Society

**Involvement of social elites:**
Jane Fonda, Ralph Nader, Tom Hayden, and California Governor Edmund Brown spoke out against nuclear power in the wake of the TMI accident. Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburgh fought the ruling to restart TMI-1.

**Joining/exiting order of social groups**

**Groups in 1st Segment:**
- American Friends Service Committee
- California Governor Edmund Brown
- Concerned Pennsylvanians United
- Jane Fonda
- Movement for a New Society
- Ralph Nader
- Three Mile Island Alert
- Tom Hayden
- Union of Concerned Scientists

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**
- International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers
- National Education Association
- United Automobile Workers
- the International Longshoremen
- the Labor Committee for Safe Energy
- the United Food and Commercial Workers
- the United Mine Workers

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**
- Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburgh

**Segment Length:** 13 months

**Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

**Opponents:**
General Public Utilities Nuclear Corporation and its subsidiaries, Metropolitan Edison, the Pennsylvania Electric Company, and Jersey Central Power & Light

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Not known

**Repressive Violence:**
Not known
Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
1 point out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
Of the four goals identified by TMIA, only the removal of Secretary Schlesinger was achieved, though the influence of antinuclear protests in his removal is not fully known. As for the other goals; customers were required to help pay the costs of the cleanup; the Price-Anderson act is still in effect as of 2011; and TMI-1 is still in operation as of 2011.

At 4:00 a.m. on Wednesday, 28 March 1979 began the worst accident in the history of United States commercial nuclear power, when the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station experienced a failure that would ultimately lead to the release of “approximately 2.5 million curies of radioactive noble gases” into the surrounding areas. This mishap, in turn, sparked the largest string of anti-nuclear protests in the country’s history. That weekend, activists held rallies across the country.

The following week again saw nationwide anti-nuclear rallies, as protesters gathered in Washington, D.C.; Groton, CT; Seattle, WA; Los Angeles, CA; Phoenix, AZ; Bloomington, IN; Ithaca, NY; Brooksville, FL; and Lancaster, PA. Another 7,000 San Franciscans marched on city hall to denounce the scheduled start of a new nuclear plant, while one thousand antinuclear activists marched on Philadelphia Electric Co. to demand an end to nuclear power.

In Japan, more than 150 survivors of the Hiroshima nuclear attack, accompanied by supporters, held a sit-in at the Hiroshima Peace Park in Tokyo to protest the ongoing use of nuclear power and the Three Mile Island accident.

During that same weekend, on 8 April, about one thousand people marched on the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg to protest nuclear power, demanding that the Three Mile Island plant be permanently closed, and urging the public utilities agency to deny a request by the Metropolitan Edison Company (Met Ed), the operator of the plant, to pass the costs of the accident along to its customers.

Within a month, organizers gained enough momentum to stage the largest antinuclear demonstration in the nation’s history. On 6 May, between 65,000 and 125,000 protesters marched from the White House to the Capitol, and heard speakers ranging from consumer activist Ralph Nader to California Governor Edmund Brown to actress Jane Fonda (who had, ironically, starred in a movie depicting an accident at a nuclear facility which was released just weeks before the TMI accident).

On 20 May, Three Mile Island Alert (TMIA) organized a gathering of two thousand people in Reading, PA at the headquarters of Met Ed. Among their demands were the removal of U.S. Energy Secretary James Schlesinger, the permanent cessation of all operations at Three Mile Island, the repeal of the Price-Anderson Nuclear Industries Indemnity Act (the federal nuclear liability insurance act), and that Met. Ed.’s stockholders assume all of the costs arising from the accident.

Formed just two years earlier to resist the proposed opening of TMI-2, the reactor that would ultimately be involved in the accident, the TMIA had started as just “twelve people mailing newsletters to about 200.” In the preceding years, they had also released balloons from the island vicinity with notes attached telling readers that they had floated from TMI and warned that air currents carried radioactive gases to the same locations, but most area residents dismissed the group as extremist and sensationalist prior to the accident. However, within weeks of the accident, the TMIA underwent a complete restructuring as veteran activists from the 1960s began taking over the leadership positions and it quickly grew from a handful of activists to the largest protest organization in the area.
Concurrently, a civil disobedience group calling itself Central Pennsylvanians United, began meeting in the aftermath of the accident to discuss nonviolent, direct action tactics to prevent a restart of the undamaged reactor TMI-1. During the late spring and early summer, both the American Friends Service Committee and the Movement for a New Society sent speakers and led workshops to educate the members of the fledgling campaign in the methods of organized protest and civil disobedience. However, in mid-summer of 1979, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) delayed the restart of the TMI-1 reactor and the group dissolved.

On the first anniversary of the TMI accident, 7,000 people held a rally in Harrisburg for the largest of a series of protest rallies held around the country from Connecticut to Texas to California. In New Jersey, fifty-six of two hundred peaceful protesters were arrested for trespassing at the headquarters of General Public Utilities (GPU), the utility that owned the TMI plant, while 200 people in Middletown, PA gathered for a peaceful antinuclear observance just a few hundred feet from TMI.

From late-1980 to mid-1981, the NRC conducted hearings to determine whether it was safe to allow a restart of TMI-1, the undamaged reactor. Under protest, citing a lack of resources and a ruling by the licensing board requiring the groups to make their arguments prior to Met Ed’s presentation, the TMIA and seven other antinuclear groups brought forward more than twenty allegations illustrating the danger of reopening TMI-1. Conversely, Met Ed argued that reopening the reactor was necessary for the financial viability of the company and for its ability to pay the costs of the accident, which were in excess of one billion dollars.

On the second anniversary of the accident, labor organizers sponsored a 10,000 strong “March on Harrisburg,” which called for the shutdown of all nuclear power plants and particularly protested against any renewal of atomic power production at the TMI plant. On the third anniversary, about 75 activists burned more $300,000 in unpaid electric bills to protest proposed plans to force customers to pay for the accident cleanup.

Two months later, on 18 May 1982, a nonbinding referendum on restarting TMI-1 was held in the three surrounding Pennsylvania counties: Dauphin, Cumberland, and Lebanon. By a two to one margin, 40,000 to 20,000, voters were overwhelming opposed to the restart. In response, Robert Arnold, the president of GPU, issued a statement stating “Between the light turnout (about 25 percent) and the difficulty in addressing the complexity of this issue with a simple yes or no answer, we are reluctant to draw firm conclusions from the referendum vote.” However, the chairman of the NRC, Nunzio Palladino, did announce that, though the referendum was non-binding, the will of the voters would have an impact on the committee’s decisions regarding any restart.

Nonetheless, this dramatic symbolic victory would be the last for this antinuclear campaign. Three months later, on 27 August, the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission approved a plan that would allow TMI’s owners to use customer funds to help pay for the cleanup. Then, in May 1985, the NRC convened a contentious session to decide the fate of the undamaged reaction. Despite outbursts from several residents, including a man who poured “symbolic blood” on the commission’s conference table, the NRC voted 4-1 in favor of lifting its ban against operating the undamaged reactor.

Soon after the vote, 200 people marched on Three Mile Island, and in groups of twenty, proceeded to sit down at the main gate where forty armed state troopers were waiting to arrest them. In all 83 were arrested during the protest, including four juveniles.

For the next five months, TMIA brought its protest to the justice system in hopes of getting the courts to block the restart. But, on October 2, the U.S. Supreme Court authorized the restart of TMI-1. That night, forty-five protesters demonstrated outside the plant and sixteen were arrested for blocking the main gate; yet, on October 3, 1985 the reactor resumed operations and was still in operation as of 2011.

**Research Notes**

**Sources:**


Additional Notes:

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Thomas Fortuna, 18/09/2011

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