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7 août 2016

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https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/08/06/wake-these-unneeded-instruments-can-wreak-mass-destruction?utm_campaign=shareaholic&utm_medium=facebook&utm_source=socialnetwork

Published on
Saturday, August 06, 2016
by
[Common Dreams](#)

Wake Up : These Unneeded Instruments Can Wreak Mass Destruction

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[20 Comments](#)

New York's Indian Point nuclear power plant. (Photo : [Hope Abrams](#)/cc/flickr)

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has recently advanced a clean energy plan which mandates that New York transition half of its energy needs to renewables by 2030. By regressive contrast, New York's Public Service Commission (PSC) has approved enormous subsidies for three aging nuclear power plants—Ginna, Nine Mile Point and FitzPatrick—located in Upstate New York. Estimates of the costs of these subsidies range from \$59 million to \$658 million by 2023, with specialists such as Blair Horner of the New York Public Interest Research Group predicting that costs could grow to \$8 billion. New York consumers will be covering the tab via their utility bills.

Ginna and Nine Mile Point are owned by the Exelon Corporation, and Exelon has plans to purchase the FitzPatrick plant. You can be sure that Exelon is frothing at the mouth for this huge bailout that was approved without adequate public scrutiny. Approval of this plan gives New York State the not-so-honorable distinction of being one of the first states to bailout the aging nuclear industry in our increasingly green energy age. The long-coddled nuclear industry is hoping that other states will follow suit.

Unfortunately, subsidizing the nuclear industry in the United States is nothing new. Since the first nuclear plants opened back in the 1950's, taxpayers have assumed nearly all of the financial risk. One of the most telling warning signs about the real cost of investing in nuclear power is that fact that Wall Street will *not* finance the construction of a nuclear plant without a full loan guarantee from the U.S. government. The reason for such caution by financial wheelers and dealers is the long history of delays, cost overruns and reactors that never came online. Whether the plants open or not, obesant politicians pass many of the nuclear boondoggle costs to the taxpayers.

Atomic energy is also uninsurable in the private insurance market. Under the Price-Anderson Act of 1957, taxpayers must cover almost all of the costs if a catastrophic nuclear accident should occur. Think of the devastation caused by Chernobyl, Fukushima and Three Mile Island. Three Mile Island, which experienced only a partial meltdown in 1979, cost approximately \$1 billion to clean up.

The case to preserve the New York nuclear power plants is that they are an "emissions-free power source." There are, however, much better, more affordable and safer low carbon options that would replace the need for nuclear energy in New York. These options were not even discussed or evaluated. A more sensible approach would have been for the PSC to present some alternative scenarios, so that citizen taxpayers could compare the risk and costs of a massive nuclear bailout against significant investments in other energy-generating options like wind and solar, in addition to energy conservation measures.

Consider the absurdity of the complex and expensive nuclear fuel cycle itself. It begins with uranium mining which produces radioactive tailings and dust, followed by the fabrication and refinement of fuel rods, the risky transport of these rods to the plant where they are installed, and then firing up the reactor so it goes critical with a huge amount of radioactivity. The end goal ? To *boil water* to generate steam to turn turbines to produce electricity !

What other method of boiling water has to have specific population evacuation plans ?

There is also the significant problem of *spent* fuel rods which are stored in pools at nuclear plants. No permanent storage sites exist for these deadly radioactive wastes, which pose national security risks, and which must be kept for thousands of years.

It's notable to point out that the Indian Point nuclear plants in New York, which are located near an earthquake fault just thirty miles from Manhattan, were excluded from the PSC proposal. Even cautious Governor Cuomo and Hillary Clinton, when she was a Senator, have acknowledged the imminent danger that Indian Point poses to the Greater New York City area and urged its closing. The 5 PM rush hour in New York's metropolitan area is bad enough without adding the chaos of a panicked mass evacuation of millions of people.

So what about those who live within the fallout zone of these three upstate plants that will be the recipients of billions of dollars of taxpayer money ? Why is Governor Cuomo trying to close Indian Point while saving these other plants ? One explanation could be right out of the classic nuclear industry handbook—hold the state hostage by threatening that the lights will go out if they don't pony up.

The public was given just 14 days to comment on the bailout proposal. Despite pushback from anti-nuclear activists, the nuclear industry prevailed. Is two weeks enough time for a thorough public debate on the merits of bailing out the costly, risky, dirty nuclear power industry ? Shame on the indentured PSC and Governor Cuomo !

Rather than prop up deteriorating nuclear plants with a huge hand out, New York officials should be focused on phasing out nuclear energy entirely. Nuclear power has been proven many times over to be unnecessary, uneconomic, uninsurable, unevacuable, unsafe and unfit for use in the unstable modern world.

New Yorkers—don't take this lying down. Write and call Governor Cuomo's office and tell them that you oppose the PSC's huge bailout to the nuclear industry. And, we hope that some citizen groups will challenge the decision in state court.

Have you seen the print, TV and radio ads touting atomic energy by the Nuclear Energy Institute ? Its top executives and the CEOs of the nuclear energy corporations have not been willing to debate publically the assertions in these ads about cost, subsidies, evacuation, risk, alternatives and climate change. I'm confident that Peter Bradford, former member of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and former chairman of the New York PSC would agree to a debate in a neutral forum such as the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. So too would Amory Lovins, physicist, author and energy consultant to agencies from electric utility companies to the Pentagon.

Can you, readers, demand that the [Nuclear Energy Institute](#) open themselves up to informed debate ? After all, they represent big corporate welfare kings that have taken taxpayers for a ride of hundreds of billions of dollars for the last sixty years. They owe you !

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Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer, and author. His latest book is [*The Seventeen Solutions : Bold Ideas for Our American Future*](#). Other recent books include, [*The Seventeen Traditions : Lessons from an American Childhood*](#), [*Getting Steamed to Overcome Corporatism : Build It Together to Win*](#), and "[*Only The Super-Rich Can Save Us*](#)" (a novel).