

Roundtable A7: Can Coal be Clean and Nuclear be Safe?

Discussion Leaders: Jerry Waters, Utility Workers of America; Mark Williams, Genergy; Diane Heminway, United Steelworkers; Bill Banig, United Mineworkers of America; Mary Olson, Nuclear Information and Resource Service; Jim Hunter, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; Howie Hawkins, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 317

Facilitator: Gene Carroll, Cornell, ILR

PRESENTATIONS

Bill Banig of the United Mineworkers of America presented his support for 'clean' coal, offering the achievements made in reducing SO₂ and other toxins following the passage of the **1970 Clean Air Act** as an illustration of what can be accomplished in the coal industry with regards to carbon reduction given the implementation of the proper technology. It was stressed that advancing carbon sequestration technology must be viewed as paramount if we plan to realize policy goals of capture and sequestration. In so far as nuclear produced energy is concerned, it was pointed out that 20% of U.S. electricity is now produced utilizing nuclear plants and that in combination with coal which is producing over 50% of the nation's electricity the question posed encompasses three quarters of America's power production.

Howie Hawkins a member of Local 317 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters answered this roundtable query with a resounding "No" on both counts. Mr. Hawkins passionately expressed the opinion that carbon sequestration is not a practical alternative and may very well offer its own imminent toxic dangers also rejecting a nuclear solution, arguing that the radioactive waste created by nuclear power plants is simply unacceptable. Advocating for investment in renewables such as wind and solar, it was maintained that the very question of coal and nuclear was to the benefit of already well established energy corporations and not in the interest of our environmental wellbeing.

Diane Heminway of the United Steelworkers recognized the advantage of coal which the U.S. has in great abundance as a means of building greater self sufficiency but questioned whether sequestration can be safe over the long term or must new technologies be sought for utilizing coal while meeting our needs for CO₂ reduction. Speaking on behalf of the benefits of nuclear production it was noted that nuclear plants can provide concentrated energy without emitting greenhouse gases, that they are domestic with the majority of reactors being designed in the U.S. and Canada, and that the construction of new facilities would create thousands of new jobs.

Jim Hunter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers announced IBEW support for both clean coal technology and the building of new nuclear plants. Affirming that the present U.S. coal supply is larger than OPEC oil reserves and that this fact should serve as motivation to set clean coal technology as a priority for both carbon reduction and national self sufficiency. Support for wind and solar power generation was also offered, however it was asserted that these renewables would not be capable of meeting the demands of **base load generation** and therefore attaining clean coal and nuclear safety are absolutely essential for meeting U.S. energy needs.

Mary Olson with the Nuclear Information and Resource Service strongly suggested that at the present time appropriate nuclear safety is not possible. The dangers of the waste produced and its implications for future generations were explored along with the risks of nuclear reactors being utilized as 'dirty bombs' in this era of the terrorist threat. It was also pointed out that although nuclear plants of themselves are not greenhouse gas emitting, the processes necessary to achieve their ends (i.e., mining, milling, transport, etc.) are indeed highly carbon producing. Renewables such as wind and solar were presented as the best means of accomplishing energy production while meeting the crucial need for carbon reduction.

Jerry Waters from the Utility Workers of America addressed the enormous economic impacts of greening the energy industry and the resistance to the construction of new power generation plants by numerous communities nationwide. The unwillingness of energy companies to invest in needed technologies and the burden of the cost to the consumer was also examined.

Mark Williams of Genergy is of the opinion that coal can be clean and nuclear can be safe. Supporting this position assessing that coal has already been made cleaner while increasing output and nuclear plants have also increased their output while reducing their safety issues. It was also stated that at present there are no viable replacement alternatives that could readily meet U.S. demand.

DISCUSSION

This roundtable discussion sparked the expression of many conflicting opinions, addressing market interests as well as labor and environmental concerns. Questions of **Just Transition** and the difficulties faced in the effected industries were emotionally examined.