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Fatal accidents waiting to happen

To the Editor:

In the age of the anti-hero, there are still men with the courage to risk economic security and act on their convictions. On February 2 three GE nuclear engineers resigned their well paid managerial posts to protest the dangers of nuclear power and work for the passage of the antinuclear initiative on the ballot in the California primary in June. Their truly creative resignations could well assure the passage of this referendum and signify the beginning of the end of the U.S. nuclear era. The referendum halts further construction of nuclear power plants until present insurance limitations on nuclear accidents are removed and safe operation and disposal of radioactive wastes is assured.

In a pronuclear power talk given in Yorktown last fall, Edward Teller, the father of the H-bomb, defined an expert as one who knows everything that can possibly go wrong, so that hair-breadth escapes from disaster such as the Brown's Ferry incident were making the nuclear power industry more expert. But here are three true "experts," real workers and designers, with an intimate knowledge of details that necessarily far exceeds Teller's, who feel that we may well learn all that can go wrong too late. All of their work in patching up an incredibly complex technology had been dedicated not to making it more safe but simply to keeping the plants operating. This is a hard enough job, as the very poor capacity factors of nuclear plants clearly indicate. The Vermont Yankee nuclear power plant was shut down last week because of a possible flaw in the safety system that could permit the worst possible accident - escape of radioactive material over a wide, populated area. The pressure not to shut down, but to keep operating in the hope that luck will hold or that a workable band-aid can be applied will eventually prove irresistible and no regulatory system can work to assure public safety.

To illustrate the unworkability of the present regulatory system in the current high pressure environment, a fourth engineer, an employee of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, has resigned his post at considerable financial loss to protest noncompliance of the Indian Point reactors with commission regulations, which were apparently waived by the commission. The defects that led to the Brown's Ferry incident, which allegedly came within an hour of meltdown, are there in Indian Point 2 and 3, fatal accidents waiting to happen.

In general it was a bad week for the environment in which economic and technological imperatives appeared to operate unabated. PCB's will continue to poison the Hudson, with help from our governor, so that we may have better transformers and capacitors; and SST's may yet land at Kennedy and Dulles with over 130 decibels so that busy executives can suffer jet lag two hours sooner. But in the brave acts of four concerned engineers, maybe there is hope.

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