

Flamanville nuclear plant explosion exposes crisis in French nuclear industry

By Anthony Torres
12 February 2017

An explosion in the machine shop of the Flamanville nuclear plant in Normandy, France on Thursday morning started a blaze that firefighters were able to bring under control only after midday. The increase in incidents in different plants in the last days, and the problems encountered in building the new EPR reactors, expose the growing crisis in the French nuclear industry.

Olivier Marmion, the spokesman for the local prefecture, told AFP: “It was a significant technical event but it was not a nuclear accident,” as the explosion occurred “outside the nuclear zone.” Five people are ill from smoke inhalation. According to initial information released by the Préfecture, the explosion, which was heard all around the site, was caused by a short-circuit of a ventilator underneath an alternator in the main machine room in the “non-nuclear” part of the site.

Reactor N°1 automatically cut itself off from the French Electricity Board’s (EDF) national grid following the incident, as did the Reactor N°2. The Nuclear Security Agency, which controls the security rules and procedures that all nuclear sites comply with, was not able to provide any further details on the incident other than those that had been relayed by the Préfecture.

For the moment, the extent of the damage caused by the fire has not been reported. According to the Association Get out of Nuclear (Sortir du Nucléaire), “the consequences of this event are not limited to the fire starting. Reactor N°1 had to undergo an emergency shutdown at 9:47 am. Not only does the residual heat still need to be evacuated but an emergency shutdown is never good for nuclear equipment, especially if it is already fragile... the Nuclear Security Agency (NSA) warns against brusque variations in temperature.”

Greenpeace, which also opposes the use of nuclear energy, commented: “With two recent fires at the Cattenom nuclear plant in Moselle this is the third fire at a nuclear plant in the last ten days.” According to Greenpeace: “The NSA itself declared that the state of Nuclear Security in France gives grounds for concern.” On the NSA web site, 12 more or less dangerous incidents in French nuclear plants were recorded for the months of December and January.

This is not the first technical incident at the Flamanville plant. The most important was the discharge of non-radioactive smoke in August 2015 from Reactor N°2. This incident provoked the triggering of an Emergency Plan for a number of hours.

Between the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016, Reactor N°2 had to be shut down for five weeks after the breakdown of a transformer that consequently had to be replaced. In October 2015, the EDF had declared a level 1 incident (the highest of 7 levels) after having discovered that wrong joints had been used in “a few” places on the both Reactor N°1 and N°2.

According to the newspaper *20 Minutes*, at the end of 2016, 21 reactors out of the 58 installed in France had been shut down, that is more than one-third. Another 15 were stopped for “planned maintenance.” However, seven were being tested because of potentially defective steam generators. Since flaws had been detected in generators built in the Areva factory in Creusot, the NSA has imposed inspections of the 18 reactors equipped with generators from this factory.

The incident at Flamanville, even though fortunately not causing a nuclear catastrophe, underlines the critical state of the nuclear installations in France. The number of reactors that are coming up to or have already gone over 40 years of service, which EDF considers the maximum, is increasing. With the aging

of the reactors, the cost of modernization before they can be replaced by a new generation of EPR reactors is increasing considerably.

The EPR reactors that are being built at the moment, notably at Flamanville and Hinckley Point in Britain, have put the Areva group in great difficulties, with long delays in completing implementation due to many hundreds of flaws discovered on the building sites. In order to save Areva, EDF has agreed to pay 2.5 billion Euros for each active reactor.

Confronted with the difficulties of the new generation of nuclear reactors, EDF is ignoring the risks and the security of the population in order to avoid a further aggravation of the crisis of the French nuclear industry.

As *Challenges* points out, “There remains the accumulated debt of Flamanville. The responsibility of authorizing the vessel of the EPR reactor, which contains too much segregated carbon, lies with the NSA. Last November, Xavier Ursat, the executive director of EDF engineering, indicated undiplomatically that he did not envisage the eventuality of a rejection by the NSA.

“We are not in such a scenario. We have never made so many tests on a vessel as this one. The NSA has validated our test program. There can’t be any surprises,” Ursat said. *Challenges* added, “The NSA is now under pressure. We would not like to be the shoes of NSA President Pierre-Franck Chevet. Whatever conclusions he renders in the coming months will be scrutinized very closely. The future of the first EPR reactor will depend on his decision. Furthermore, the EPRs in Britain the first of which is Hinckley Point (which itself depends on the successful launching of Flamanville) and finally the entire French nuclear power industry.”

The nuclear industry is a strategic question for French capitalism in order to insure its energy independence. This industry has also served to give France a dominant political role on the continent through nuclear weapons under De Gaulle to counteract German economic dominance.

The growing number of incidents in nuclear reactors and the difficulties with EPR expose the bankruptcy of a national strategy based on financial interests that are incapable of insuring the safe development of nuclear energy. The catastrophe of Fukushima in 2011, as well as the incident Thursday morning, are warnings about

the nature and the operation of this industry by the French and international bourgeoisie.

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