

# Environmentalists Protest the Construction of a Nuclear Power Plant in Wyhl (1975)

## Abstract

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Through media attention, a conflict over the construction of a nuclear power station in the village of Wyhl (in Baden-Württemberg) became a national news story. The conflict pitted public officials, promoters of the energy industry, and the expert representatives of both groups against a broad-based civic protest group consisting of a curious mixture of local farmers and environmental activists.

## Source

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Wyhl is a village (circa 3,000 residents) north of Kaiserstuhl on the Rhine within whose boundaries a nuclear power station is supposed to be built. At 4 x 1300 megawatts, the station would be the world's largest to date.

On July 9 and 10, 1973, there was a public discussion in Wyhl's assembly hall on the matter of the nuclear power plant. That meant that, for the last time, the regulatory authority (various state ministries) summoned everyone who had something to say about the contentious issues, listened to their objections, offered the opposing side the opportunity for a rebuttal, and then formed an opinion. The whole thing had the character of a tribunal, with the people from the ministries playing judge and objectively issuing a verdict "in the name of the people." The public, about 1,000 people from the local region, some of whom had taken two extra days off from work, witnessed an instructive spectacle. It was not so much the plot that mattered, but the roles, which became clearer and clearer over the course of the hearing. The public drew its own conclusions about this play, and on the second day they broke up the hearing.

At this last big meeting, at which all the participants were present, a number of people saw for the first time, in rich detail, precisely who was representing whose interests.

1. On the stage, up above, at a long table, sat the *government officials*. In the middle, with the controls for all the microphones in hand, was the emissary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Grawe. He oozed objectivity and matter-of-factness—as long as things did not get critical. Then [when it got serious], he condescendingly suggested to an agitated farmer that he ought to submit his notes in writing. Or he made it clear that he was only putting up with the environmentalists' talk for the sake of good form. Or he simply turned off the microphones in the hall. He indignantly rejected a motion that claimed that his ministry was biased. He did this although everyone knows that both his boss, Economics Minister Eberle, and Minister President Filbinger sit on the board of directors of Badenwerk—in other words, on the governing board of the organization that had submitted the application to build the power station. He did this although the government had already declared, much earlier, that Wyhl had to be built in order to put an end to the disruptions caused by environmentalists. Although, in other words, the verdict in this show trial had been decided long ago, because the judges and the applicants were one and the same.

2. Below the stage, seated in a row, were the *expert witnesses* for meteorological, hydrological, radiological questions etc.: civil servants, professors, likewise a neutral, value-free, competent authority. It was funny how, behind the torrent of scientific terminology, they sang the same refrain in unison: the nuclear power station is not harmful; on the contrary, it is beneficial in every respect. Then, the members

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of the public laughed, because they knew from countless meetings that these expert witnesses were delivering the desired responses for cash, that they were lying and doing sloppy work to boot. When the nuclear power station in Fessenheim was being planned, the French explained that the wind would blow the cooling tower's steam eastward, toward Baden. When they got around to Breisach later on, the same scientists were of the opposite opinion: Suddenly, the wind was blowing toward the west. [...]

3. At the front of the hall, to the left, sat the *representatives of the managers*, KERNKRAFTWERK SÜD GmbH[1] and the manufacturer, KRAFTWERKSUNION[2], technocrats carted in from Karlsruhe, Stuttgart, and other places, who, looking hassled, approached the hall microphone every now and then to allay, yet again, the concerns of a farmer with hearing problems. The public already knew some of them by name. They knew that they represented profit interests exclusively, yet talked about "supplying" the population. And [they knew] that they had contempt for uneducated people. For these gentlemen had already made an appearance in Breisach in 1972. At that time, however, the government had let the project drop shortly before the state parliamentary elections, since the vintners had threatened to abstain from voting. And in the Wyhl region, Messieurs Braun, Stäbler, and Co. had made a name for themselves at Badenwerk propaganda events ever since the government had chosen Wyhl as the site of the new nuclear power plant on May 14, 1973.

This big, bloated balloon was inflated even further by a squadron of *riot police* in the basement and "plain clothes informers" who were trying everywhere to eavesdrop to what was said, even when they were sent away.

The cohesiveness of this nuclear power plant front made the public so aggressive that everyone belonging to the disparate heap of power plant opponents was applauded for at least being "one of us."

At the front of the hall, to the right, sat the speakers, environmentalists, mayors, civic action groups. On short notice they had collected 95,000 protest signatures and written long scientific and legal appeals.

The spokespersons for the *environmental groups* (students, professors, teachers, physicians) were likewise familiar to the public, known as opponents of the technocrats.

[...]

The spokespersons for the *civic action groups* from the different villages were the ones who most clearly represented the public's opinion. Alarmed by warnings from environmentalists and by a wave of environmental scandals, which the media was at least reporting, they initially pleaded economic interests. They have good reason to fear for agriculture: the maize and grain fields, fruit and tobacco plantations, fisheries for ground water, the woods. The most solid group are the vintners. Supported for years by subsidies, vine transfers, the introduction of modern methods, and a lot of family work, winegrowing in Kaiserstuhl is now supposed to be sacrificed to the interest of big industry. Not a soul understands why. That's why the crisis of confidence is so dire. Previously the government had sent subsidies, and now [it's sending] the nuclear industry. "We can't just strap our fields over our shoulders and move away," says a tobacco planter. And this also goes for the part-time farmers who work at Rhodia in Freiberg or Klöckner in Malterdingen: in every crisis heretofore, their land, their houses, their portions of a vineyard had been a form of security, a useful fallback.

The spokesperson for the civic action groups are so well informed, better than we used to be, better than many (otherwise critical-minded) big-city dwellers who confuse the entire movement with Luddism. Many villagers, even those who don't read much, have been attending informational meetings for years, reading books, distributing leaflets and stuffing them, one by one, into mailboxes (within a 50 km vicinity!) by the thousands, demonstrating, and sending letters to the editor.

The *public* did not restrict itself to listening during the two days of the discussion meeting. It revolted by

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chanting in unison, heckling, and whistling whenever the official lies became too outrageous. After some arrogant, authoritarian utterances from chairman Grawe, a tumult broke out for minutes on end. For the first time, people called out in a lapidary chorus: “The nuclear power plant will not be built!” And when the civic action groups issued a call for a walkout on the afternoon of July 10, virtually the only ones remaining in the hall were the government, industry, the police, and the press—quite a striking alliance.

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## NOTES

[1] KERNKRAFTWERK SÜD GmbH: a subsidiary of Badenwerk—trans.

[2] KRAFTWERKSUNION: AEG and Siemens—trans.

Source: Walter Mossmann, “Die Bevölkerung ist hellwach!,” *Kursbuch* 1975, no. 39, p. 129 ff.  
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