

Sellafield – a local view

Martin Forwood

'My father worked at Sellafield, I work at Sellafield and I want my sons to work at Sellafield' is a statement sometimes overheard in West Cumbria. By implication, work means reprocessing, a traditional operation carried out by British Nuclear Fuels at Sellafield. To those of us who have opposed this operation for a multitude of reasons (CORE has campaigned since 1980 to stop reprocessing), that view of past, present and future employment prospects in the area has little merit or force when held against the realities of reprocessing, its economics and environmental impacts.

To meet the UK's post-war scramble to make nuclear bombs, the plutonium created in fuel used in the Windscale Piles had to be extracted somehow for use in weapons – and reprocessing in this country was born. In the mid 1970's, with the nuclear industry in its ascendancy and making inflated projections about the rise of nuclear power worldwide, commercial reprocessing made some sense as a recycling operation in which both uranium and plutonium could be recovered from old reactor fuel and re-used as new fuel.

On the back of these hopes, reprocessing contracts were signed by home and overseas customers, many of whom looked on the deal not so much as a way of securing fuel supplies for the future, but of ridding themselves of the problem of managing their spent fuel. Photographs of Japanese workers waving goodbye to BNFL's ships as they transported tonne after tonne from Japan to Sellafield bear testimony to the relief of many customers in off-loading their nuclear waste problem for many decades to an unsuspecting community across the world.

This was the bread of life to Sellafield, as are the current transports from UK power stations to West Cumbria. The reality is however very different. As a recycling operation, reprocessing has been an abject failure with around 5% only of the estimated 40,000 tonnes of uranium recovered at Sellafield having been re-used as new fuel. The re-use of plutonium is even less.

On top of this, and in parallel with the ending of the cold-war and the demand for weapons plutonium, commercial customers recognise that they have paid through the nose for a BNFL service that has proved to be hugely polluting and environmentally contaminating, its discharges providing radiation readings around Sellafield that would be illegal in BNFL's customer countries. The realisation of the nonsense of reprocessing does not however stop here for customers as they now make arrangements to take back their unwanted waste products as per the original contract, against mounting opposition from their own politicians and public who were blissfully unaware of the sordid detail of the reprocessing contracts signed in the 1970's.

But what about the price West Cumbrians have paid for this pipe-dream that was never to stand up to close scrutiny ? The easily quantifiable downsides of reprocessing are well documented and include accumulations of Intermediate and High Level Wastes (including foreign wastes) with no home to go to, stockpiles of unwanted plutonium and uranium and a badly contaminated local environment. Less easily quantified is the health damage caused over the years by Sellafield's radioactive operations. The finger of suspicion justifiably points to radiation from the plant, and higher than national rates of various cancers are recorded up and down the Cumbrian coast. Unwilling to commit industrial suicide by admitting to their complicity in any health detriment, BNFL maintains that the problems are caused by population mixing – an as yet unidentified virus which apparently wreaks havoc when in-coming workers mix with the locals. The company has so far singularly failed to prove that radiation is not the cause and, whilst the arguments rage, is content to carry on polluting as if there is no tomorrow. It's what some people might call getting away with murder.

But what of the man who wants his children to work at Sellafield – what of his and their future ? In reprocessing they have none, as the dwindling order book and customer disdain shows. Coaxed by high wages and other benefits, he and his family have become dependent, like a drug-addict, on BNFL and its promises. In the same way, West Cumbria and its local economy have been dominated by the nuclear industry since the 1950's at the expense of new non-nuclear jobs and non-nuclear inward investment. Our West Cumbrian family should not though be too downhearted. Disentangling themselves from the Company's apron strings, taking management promises with a pinch of salt and taking a peep at reprocessing as the rest of the world sees it would provide the necessary consolation that there will always be work at Sellafield cleaning up and generally managing the mess BNFL have created over the years. As other nuclear sites can testify, job numbers may increase as full decommissioning of plant and equipment gathers momentum.

For BNFL executives, the end of reprocessing will result in nothing more than a smattering of egg on their faces which, once wiped, can be turned towards the golden and mounting opportunities of clean-up work at home and overseas. With Magnox reprocessing already scheduled to close – admittedly not soon enough for us - THORP will run out of business in the next 4 years or so unless there is a dramatic change of heart by customers which, from British Energy's current effort to switch their contracts from reprocessing to storage, is unlikely in the extreme. With reprocessing plants closed, BNFL can then join those overseas countries who sensibly dry store their spent fuel in above ground, custom built stores and in the move from reprocessing can in one foul swoop cut Sellafield's environmental discharges in line with the proposed OSPAR directive and Nordic countries' wishes, stop accumulating nuclear waste and stockpiling plutonium, and halt the transport of highly radioactive materials to and from Sellafield with all the inherent risks to communities through which the transports travel.

In a nutshell, we'd all be better off and West Cumbria could start again afresh with significantly improved hopes of attracting new businesses and jobs unrelated to the nuclear industry. Ridding itself of its dirty reprocessing tag, all sections of the community would benefit in the long term and the Sellafield workforce could take some pride in managing long-term the legacy initiated in the rush for the bomb.