

(reprinted with permission from New Scientist, 4 December 1975)

Love me do!

This cry from the heart echoed through the annual joint meeting of the nuclear community in San Francisco. The nuclear people consider public acceptance a key problem; but it is only one of many now confronting them

Crowds clustered on San Francisco street-corners on a November Monday, craning their necks skyward. On the topmost balcony of the Hotel St Francis, some 50-odd stories above the pavement, a tiny figure hung outside the railings, teetering precariously to and fro. The roadway below was blocked off by police; firetrucks were lined up, a pathetically futile net strung between their extended ladders, which did not reach a tenth of the distance toward the teetering figure. Throughout most of the sunny afternoon the drama continued. Then, as the shadows lengthened, the jumper clambered back inside the railing and disappeared from view. On the following day the newspapers revealed that this was his fourth such exploit this year.

On that same Monday, 17 November, the Hotel St Francis was playing host to the opening day of the annual conference of the Atomic Industrial Forum, the world's largest organisation of businesses and industries involved in civil nuclear power. Two blocks away, at the San Francisco Hilton, the American Nuclear Society was likewise commencing its annual conference in parallel with the AIF. The episode of the jumper must have struck many AIF/ANS participants as an unnecessarily macabre metaphor to greet their gathering. But it cannot be denied that it was grimly appropriate.

An avowed critic of nuclear activities can lay only limited claim to objectivity. With that disclaimer, however, it must be said that even the most dedicated opponent of nuclear power generation cannot have expected to find the industry on the verge of panic. Such proved to be the case. The preceding year had been, for the US nuclear business, the worst on record, with delays and cancellations of power plant orders numbering well over one hundred. General Atomic, its last order for high-temperature gas cooled reactors gone, had just withdrawn from the reactor business. The rest of the nuclear fuel cycle was in similar disarray, with no commercial reprocessing facilities available, enrichment plants fully committed, uranium costs rocketing, and spent fuel ponds filling.

The AIF/ANS delegates received a frankly brutal series of inhospitable gestures to welcome their convocation. The preceding week saw a cover article in *Business Week* entitled "Why atomic power dims today"; on Sunday, 16 November the *New York Times* ran a front-page feature headed "Hope for cheap power from atom is fading". On 10 November a jury awarded \$7 783 000 in libel damages to TV producer Don Widener, whose film "Powers That Be" had been blocked by the Californian utility Pacific Gas & Electric. The judgement against PG&E was said to be "the largest jury award to an individual in the history of English common law". The film, a witty and penetrating critique of nuclear power, narrated by Jack Lemmon, was screened throughout the conference before overflow audiences in a suite in the Hilton hired for the occasion by Friends of the Earth.

In face of all the demoralising developments overtaking them the nuclear delegates were certainly ready for a conference with the theme "An Industry Challenged". The aspect of the challenge which most preoccupied them was public acceptance, or the lack of it. This issue echoed throughout the week; and a whole series of sessions were devoted explicitly to it. Tuesday saw a whole day devoted to "Public Interest Issues in Nuclear Power", with industry spokesmen occupying the morning session and critics the afternoon. The afternoon gathering played to standing-room only; an estimated 1200 nuclear delegates lined the walls of the Hilton's largest ballroom to be told why they were unloved and distrusted. To a bystander the atmosphere was almost masochistic.

The Forum Awards for advancing public understanding of nuclear energy involved another irony. No award was given for broadcast journalism. The print award was split between David Perlman of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and John McPhee of the *New Yorker*. McPhee's award was for a piece called "Atlantic Generating Station". But McPhee is better known in nuclear circles for his profile of Ted Taylor, "The Curve of Binding Energy", a scarifying vision of nuclear terrorism.

The AIF held a breakfast briefing for newsmen Wednesday, once again scratching obsessively at the same itch. Later that morning there followed what in previous years would have been called the "Wives' Session", but had been relabelled the "Guests' Session", devoted to wondering aloud why people refuse to believe that all is well in this best of nuclear worlds. On Thursday morning the first quarter-hour of the main AIF session was devoted to a slide-show, obviously flown from Washington overnight, depicting in elaborate full-frontal detail the doings at Ralph Nader's Critical Mass 75, which coincided with the first three days of the industry's conference. The speaker described with meticulous precision the Nader meeting's objectives; there were so many mug shots that it was tempting to suppose that a sizeable number of the Critical Mass participants must have been AIF photographers. Llewellyn King, publisher of the *Weekly Energy Report*, devoted a special issue to the two contrasting conferences, and in an urgent final editorial warned the nuclear establishment that "this nation is quite capable of voting itself out of the nuclear club as far as power generation is concerned".

Nevertheless, at least one speaker drew uncompromising attention to the problem of the industry which did not derive from its public position as an "\$80 billion underdog" - the AIF's characterisation earlier this year. Richard McCormack of General Atomic delivered a pungent and outspoken onslaught on the whole economic organisation of the nuclear industry, declaring that its entire historical foundations were inappropriate, and asking "Is this a legitimate business to be in as it's currently structured?" He asserted that "front-line vendors to the electric utility industry have yet to make a dollar with certainty, after some 20 years of effort". McCormack went on to say that this prospect certainly showed no sign of improving in the present context.

In ironic contrast, his namesake, Congressman Mike McCormack, delivered a fighting exhortation at the joint conference banquet two days later. On their way out of the banquet one delegate was overheard saying to another "Did that cheer you up?" "That's what I came for", was the response. The Hotel St Francis jumper was talked off his precipice; but it will take more than talk to rescue the US nuclear industry.