Utilities

Nuclear Initiatives

The intensifying campaign against nuclear power has developed what may turn out to be its most devastating weapon in the form of a number of drive for the placement of initiatives on the ballots of a number of states, mostly in the west. Under initiative provisions in the constitutions of 22 states, laws can be proposed directly to the citizenry at the behest of a certain percentage of the state's registered voters.

Already on the ballot for June 1976 is the California Nuclear Safeguards Act, which qualified when petitioners were able to gather over 313,000 signatures within 150 days. The California initiative would allow nuclear plants to be built only if the effectiveness of safety systems is demonstrated through testing and that problems of waste storage is solved and current federal limits on liability are removed. If these conditions could not be met, existing plants would not be shut down, but would be required to operate at a reduced power level.

Proponents of the initiative, grouped in a broad coalition called People for Proof: The California Committee for Nuclear Safeguards, argue that the measure merely forces the utilities to prove their claims that nuclear power is safe. Most observers believe, however, that it will be very difficult for the troubled nuclear industry to meet any one of the three conditions involved. The result of the passage of the initiative, they predict, would be to cripple the nuclear industry in the nation's largest state.

The nuclear industry appears to agree with that assessment. Several groups have been set up to fight the initiative, one of them headed by former Governor Pat Brown. One problem hampering industry efforts — which are expected to focus on heavy use of the media — is that under an earlier initiative approved by the voters one side may not outspend the other by more than $500,000.

The California Committee for Nuclear Safeguards Act was a significant reason for the development of the initiative strategy. For while the petitioning process requires enormous amounts of time and labor, the end result is not subject to the whims of a few legislators as is often the case at the statehouse. Still, legislative efforts will no doubt continue, resulting in an increasing awareness that nuclear power is a political problem.

But utility executives and the companies that manufacture America's nuclear hardware will be looking most closely at the states with nuclear initiatives on their ballot. For American citizens have never really had much of a say about nuclear power and their first real opportunity to do so will make a lasting impact on the energy policy of their country.

MASS. PLEDGE CAMPAIGN UNDERWAY

Commencing October 1, 1975, over 15,000 electric utility customers in Massachusetts pledged to withhold payment of their bills in an effort to gain "lifeline" rates before winter. The massive withholding movement will affect the four major utilities providing service in Massachusetts — Boston Edison, New Bedford Gas and Electric, Massachusetts Electric, and Western Electric.

The campaign, a result of organizing by CAP-Energy in the spring and summer, seeks a rate of 2.7 cents for the first 300 kwh. CAP-Energy estimates that this proposal will lower the average residential bill by 20 percent and will freeze the price on essential electricity.

The withholding campaign could back up the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) if each person threatened with disconnection demanded the right to an individual conference before termination of service.

The popularity of the proposal — according to staffer Jim Rosenthal over 1,000 pledges are received each week — and CAP-Energy's announcement in July of its October 1 target date to call in its pledges, prompted the DPU to schedule a series of hearings on whether...
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