

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 broad 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, the 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. Proponents of the initiative have already charged opponents with reporting violations.

Regardless of the outcome, the California initiative is certain to increase the decibel level of the nuclear debate in that state. The impact of the California initiative may be magnified, however, by the concurrent drive for similar measures in a number of other states. Citizens in Oregon had 14 months to gather the required 48,000 signatures; they pulled in 60,000 in six weeks. Citizens are actively organizing in Okla-

homa, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Washington, Kansas, Iowa and Missouri, as well as in two eastern states with initiative powers, Maine and Massachusetts. All of the initiatives are similar to California's, although most do not apply to existing plants.

The sparkplug behind much of this activity is the People's Lobby, a California group credited with passage through initiative of the California Political Reform Act. Although operating on a shoestring, People's Lobby is actively providing advice and training to citizen groups in the initiative states.

At present it appears that initiative organizers have an excellent chance of qualifying initiatives in more than a dozen states. If three or four of the measures pass, it could place the future of nuclear power in this country in serious question.

The reason for this is that aside from growing public opposition, the nuclear industry has a number of economic problems ranging from the poor economic performance of the plants to escalating plant construction costs. With demand for electricity down sharply from earlier projections, utilities are having trouble raising the money for the new plants which they claim they will need. And with investors already somewhat jittery over these problems the increase in public outcry backed by legislation will only intensify this nervousness.

Equally important is the fact that a decision by voters in several states to demand higher safety standards for nuclear power would have an enormous impact on their elected representatives. Some politicians would be quick to modify their support for nuclear power and increasing numbers would appear in outright opposition.

Such a political change would be of considerable significance to the nuclear industry because its future may well depend on a government bail out, such as the Ford Administration's multi-billion dollar energy development authority proposal. Given the controversial nature of any such massive proposal to assist private enterprise, opposition from representatives of states with initiative campaigns might prove to be a determining factor.

At the same time as the initiative campaigns are qualifying potential laws for the ballot, legislative efforts to curb nuclear power will probably continue. Last April, Vermont passed a law requiring legislative approval before a

nuclear plant could be built in the state, a measure which local utility officials labelled as a moratorium, apparently in the belief that the legislature would never approve a plant.

While legislation has been introduced in approximately 20 other states, few bills have passed. Most state legislatures are tightly controlled by their leadership and committee chairmen have wide powers to bottle up legislation. In addition, the lobbying power of utility companies on the state level is greater than it is in Congress.

The difficulty of passing legislation through state legislatures 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 effect 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 backlog 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

From the Reader of the Conference on Alternative State & Local Public Policies held June 10-13, 1976 in Austin, Texas. The reader was edited and compiled by Derek Shearer, California Public Policy Center Los Angeles, California and Lee Webb, Professor of Public Policy, Goddard College Plainfield, Vermont.

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