



Marking the disaster

Following the recent 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, visiting MEP Jill Evans talks to Andrew Mickel about life at the site of the world's worst nuclear disaster

On April 26, 20 years ago, Reactor No 4 at Chernobyl nuclear power station in what is now Ukraine exploded. In what has become a totemic symbol of the problems with nuclear industry. To mark the anniversary, Plaid MEP and chair of nuclear campaign group CND Cymru, Jill Evans, visited the site.

The land is now largely deserted, with the locals banned from returning to the site - although this is a rule that many of them choose to ignore.

Despite being one of the most lethal places on Earth, Jill still got to visit the reactors up close. "We went to the power station. There were originally four reactors, but even after the explosion, three were kept working.

"We did go into Reactor Four, but there's a sarcophagus over it now. The problem is that it has cracks in it now. There's a new project to replace it, and the EU's helping, as it's in everyone's interest to keep it safe."

Whilst it's only really safe for visitors to quickly pass in and out, there are some people who have to work there constantly to keep the site safe. "We were only allowed to stay there for twenty minutes. There are very few people there - we just saw some of the scientists who go in by train. They work four days on, four days off." Without the work of scientists in the area - in particular the 'liquidators' who sacrificed their own lives in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the site would be a far greater hazard than it is now.

In neighbouring Belarus, the cleanup bill currently stands at £131.5 billion

"We also met some of the residents who've gone back. One man told us that four to five days after the explosion, as the Soviet Union were trying to cover it up, that it was only then that they were told they had to pack their things up and leave.

"They were taken to Kiev. The land they were given was very poor. Despite what the government said, they went back to their land. They had



CHERNOBYL: Jill Evans and the encased Reactor No 4

chickens and a pig and were growing their own food.

"They were still angry the government were still promising them that they would be rehoused, but nothing was happening."

Still, despite the enormity of the disaster, it may not be clear why a Plaid MEP would be visiting the area.

As it happens, the region's ties to Wales are surprisingly substantial. 350 North Wales hill farms are still contaminated and working under restrictions - having had substantial quantities of radioactive material dumped on them by wind and rain. They now suffer the worst effects of the disaster outside of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. But there is at least one good story to come from Wales links with the regions. "The other link with the area are the many children from Chernobyl with leukaemia and other cancers. They come every summer holiday to breathe in the clean air in an uncontaminated environment."

To mark the 20th anniversaries various reports have been released to try

and quantify the effects of the disaster. But whilst the official World Health Organisation (WHO) report suggested that just 4,000 people die a year, four other reports released suggested the rate to be 700-1500% of that level. Jill says that, even now, the worst is not fully acknowledged. "One reason [for the discrepancy between reports] was that the WHO looked at just Belarus,

Ukraine and Russia, as the worst affected countries, instead of all of Europe. I've heard another report is coming out with even higher numbers for the cancer rates. What it shows is we need a proper independent inquiry. A lot of the results are only showing themselves now."

Despite having had the worst nuclear disaster happen on its soil, and

with the clear-up still costing Belarus, Ukraine and Russia hundreds of billions of pounds a year, Ukraine is still pushing ahead with nuclear power as a solution to its energy needs. Jill remains unconvinced by the need for it. "I can't understand it myself. I know they've got to make a difficult decision, as they don't want to be reliant on Moscow.

Companies who've lost nuclear contracts in Europe are pushing hard in the Ukraine

"But we know that big nuclear companies who've lost their big contracts in places like Germany are pushing hard in countries like the Ukraine."

The cost of the continuing clean-up is phenomenal. In neighbouring Belarus alone, the bill currently stands at £131.5 billion. It is not surprising that the disaster has left such a long shadow over the use of nuclear power in Europe, and effectively stopped its use in many countries. In the UK alone, a government report last year noted that there was enough radioactive waste being unsafely stored to fill the Albert Hall six times, in what would definitely amount to some pretty bizarre concerts.

Considering we cannot even keep control of our own nuclear waste, it's no surprise that Chernobyl still poses so much relevance to the decisions we make about our energy future.



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