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a grass roots victory!

On June 27th, the Australian Labor Party decided not to expand its three named uranium mine policy. We can all take satisfaction in the fact that we are responsible for this decision. That we did so in the face of formidable opposition from the mining lobby makes the success even greater.

Of the submissions to the ALP Uranium Policy Review Committee, 97% were either opposed to uranium mining or wanted an industry phase-out. The mining companies were not going to let this minor detail stand in their way. Mining representatives promised that Jabiluka and Koongarra, which lie in Kakadu, would bring untold wealth. Thankfully, the Australian public recognises that Kakadu is priceless and too precious to trade off.

The uranium campaign of the past year was not one of high-powered, attention-grabbing direct actions. Rather it was a campaign which took on that most vital task – informing the public and the ALP membership about the nuclear industry. There were several key points we addressed.

We had to face the preposterous notion that because the government had not allowed Coronation Hill to go ahead, that Jabiluka and Koongarra should be mined. The idea that parts of the planet can be swapped in this way is patently obscene. It is interesting to note that mining companies also claimed that future investors would see Australia as a bad risk. We took the time to find out just how many mining leases are already held in this country. The figure runs into tens of thousands.

After the example of Coronation Hill, some mining companies claimed that if the issue of mining was to be decided on Aboriginal claims, then Jabiluka should be allowed to go ahead. What was fascinating about this argument was the silence of CRA, the owner of the Kintyre uranium deposit in Rudall River National Park, Western Australia. CRA is one of the most aggressive pro-uranium lobbyists, yet it never once mentioned that the Aboriginals of the Rudall River region completely oppose uranium mining.

it wasn't sexy, but it worked

The first step happened in September and October of 1990, when Alastair Harris, Greenpeace National Union Liaison, and I undertook a five week speaking tour of Australia, visiting the uranium mining sites and the state capitals. We met with local trade unionists, Party representatives and local people. This was vital to give us the information we needed for the entire campaign. During our campaign we took a proactive stance and worked hard to get what we learned out to Parliamentarians, ALP members and the public.

From November, we produced a series of nationwide mailouts to all state and federal Labor MPs and senators, all federal MPs and senators of other parties, all ALP affiliated state branches of trade unions, all state and local ALP branches, and environment groups nationally. The six mailouts covered such topics as the number of jobs and the amount of money gained from uranium mining, through to the world status of the nuclear industry. We held many street stalls around the country, with letter writing and postcard signings, as well as organising strategic canvass teams who targetted key constituencies.

We lobbied in Parliament House and spoke to eight ALP Caucus Committees. We presented evidence on issues ranging from the effects of radiation on miners, the economics of uranium mining and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The lobbying round was greatly aided by Dr Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh. Ciaran has lived in the Northern Territory, and his understanding of the area was vital in providing the overview that many MPs lack.

There is no doubt this campaign had an impact. Many people at the ALP Conference told us that the ALP central office and

MPs had been snowed under by anti-uranium mining letters. A number of MPs and delegates themselves thanked us for providing our information and said it had proven invaluable in countering industry arguments. Our information also supported the determined efforts of Jeanette McHugh, Richard Mills and Peter Milton, the three anti-uranium members of the Policy Review Committee. For the most elegant and eloquent summation against uranium mining, look no further than the speech Jeanette gave during the Conference uranium debate.

Equally important, there were those who said that given the pressure they were feeling from grassroots membership, they could not afford to vote for expansion of the uranium industry. This attitude represents a victory for mobilising and empowering the public to take part in political decision-making.

We can all take comfort from the ALP's decision, because we all made it happen. I must, however, take a few lines to thank some special people – Bob Chnoweth, who worked as a consultant/lobbyist; Dave Firn and Andy Jennings, nuclear campaigners in the Sydney office; and last, but by no means least, Maggie Hine, the uranium campaigner in the Adelaide office whose hard work has borne such rich fruit.

We believe the nuclear industry is in such dire shape that it will not recover. We believe that as demand for uranium falls even further, the economics of the industry will become even bleaker. The present three named mines policy, which in truth is only two operating mines, is a phase-out policy. By the time of the 1993 ALP Conference, the industry will be in even worse shape. And we'll be in a better position to take them on! Greenpeace will not rest until it sees an end to the uranium mining industry. Many of our campaigns are retrospective. But on this occasion we got there in time to stop the bulldozers and drilling equipment.

Jean McSorley