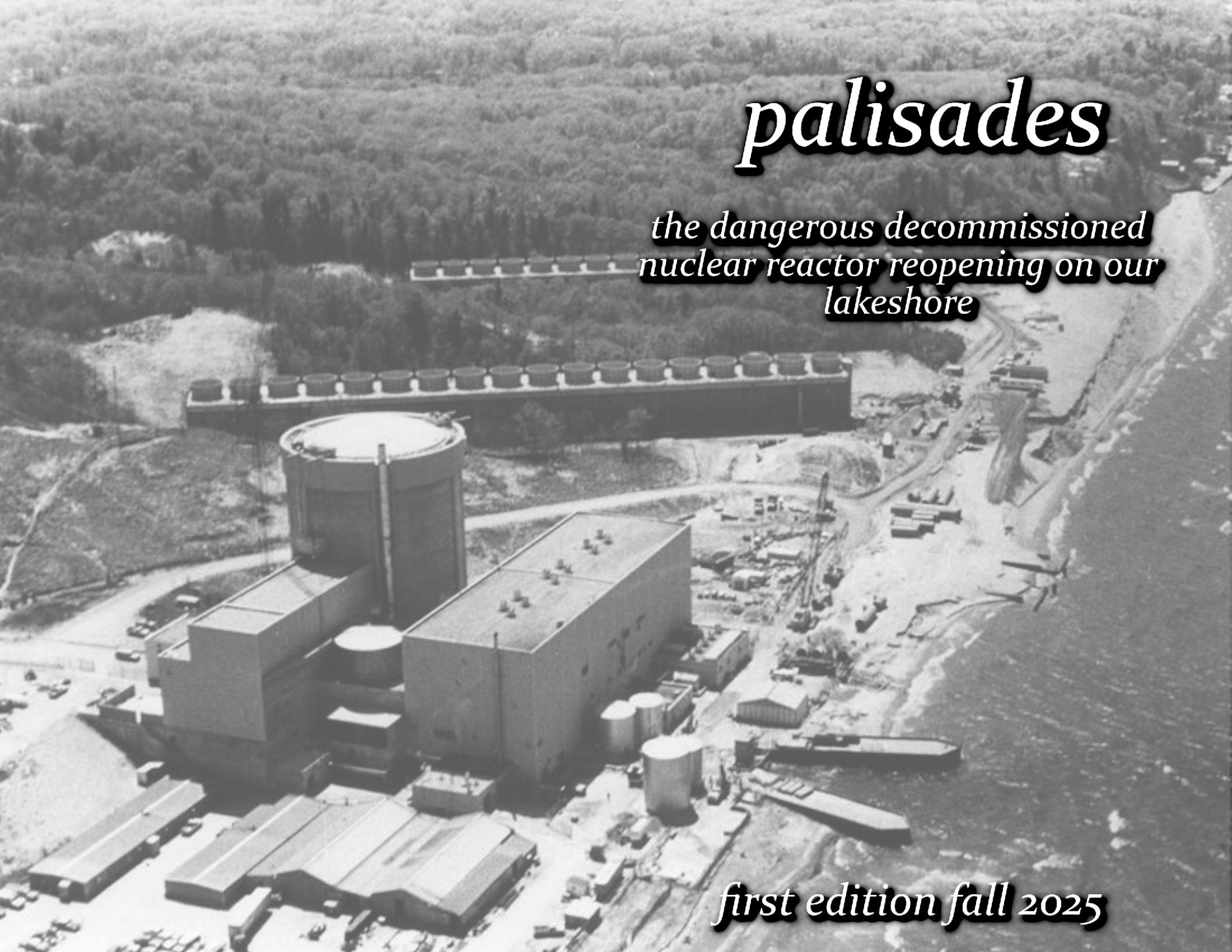

palisades

the dangerous decommissioned nuclear reactor reopening on our lakeshore

first edition fall 2025

Foreward

Hi reader :)

So the structure of this zine might be kiiiiiiinda weird. Yes, it is about the Palisades nuclear plant and Whitmer/Holtec's plan to restart it using massive amounts of taxpayer money. But in researching this zine, we found that we also wanted to engage with some of the larger questions of nuclear energy. After all, both parts of that topic (nuclear and energy) bring up some pretty existential stuff. Instead of dancing around that to try to find broader appeal or more narrowly focus on the sins of this particular plant (of which there are many), we wanted to look at the big-picture questions head on.

We hope to provide enough information for you to hate this plant as much as we do (and we also encourage you to look outside of this zine to learn more about it), but we also hope it gets you thinking about nuclear energy in the broader context of capitalism & colonialism.

The first part of the zine focuses on the basics of the plant, its decommissioning, and the plan to restart it. The remainder is a discussion of environmental racism, corporate negligence, labor issues, and degrowth in the context of nuclear energy, with a specific focus on Palisades.

Let's envision a world where we see land, water, and air in terms of relationships; where we meet needs instead of manufacturing them; where we, collectively, share all the power.

Sources & Further Reading

Andrewism, *How Degrowth Can Save the World* (Youtube)

https://beyondnuclear.org/newest-nuke-nightmares-at-palisades-2022-present/

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https://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/2022/05/palisades-nuclear-power-plant-shuts-down-11-days-early.html

https://www.npr.org/2006/12/24/6670689/covert-michigan-a-history-in-black-and-white

Today, Palisades sits next to a state park, with beaches and sand dunes all around; the settlers designated this area for "recreation," but the dunes hold a far more important purpose for the original people. Sand dunes are places of incredible spiritual and cultural significance for Neshnabék. All around the lake, dunes have historically been a place for gatherings and ceremonies. Important food and medicine sources which only grow in these sacred places would be gathered seasonally. Places like these along the water are important sites for burials and funerary rituals.

Highlighting the spiritual significance of the dunes is important in understanding the devastation this plant would cause, but we must also mention the existence of another site startlingly close to the nuclear plant. There is an incredibly important sacred site which is put at risk by Palisades. Out of respect for the sacred place we will not be sharing the name or location in this zine. This is a place for deeply sacred ceremonies that are still practiced today by Bodéwadmi people. For settlers reading this zine, we would ask:

How would you feel about a nuclear reactor built on your family's graveyard?

How would you feel about nuclear waste in your place of worship?

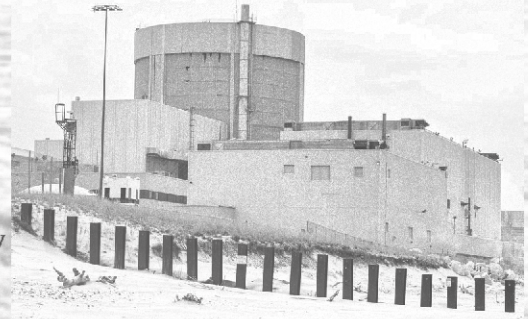
What would you be willing to do to stop it from happening?

Introduction: Spectre on the Water

I remember family trips to Lake Michigan as a child. We would camp with friends at Van Buren State Park, where we could bike down to the lake and step tentatively into her icy waves. We would boldly dive in, skin tightening against the frigid water. As we swam around, we would sometimes drift down the shoreline into the shadow of a bizarre, concrete facility.

It seemed so out of place amidst the dune grasses and mature maples. As we approached, we felt the waters get warmer. It was pleasant on our bodies which were working so hard to stay warm. But something never felt quite right about that building or those waters at its feet.

Maybe it's the hindsight in knowing its dangers now, or maybe my intuition understood something the plant's designers couldn't seem to see. They had calculated the risks and our bodies, our lives, were within an acceptable margin.



Palisades Nuclear Plant was built between 1967 and 1970. It operated between 1973 and 2022, when it was closed down based on decisions made by Michigan Public Service Commission which deemed it unsafe. The shutdown was planned, but came 11 days early due to concern over a faulty control rod seal.

The Palisades plant has a long history of operational risk. Many of these risks, which include both energy generation and spent fuel storage, persist today. Those of primary concern are:

-welding flaws & earthquake vulnerability in spent fuel storage and -degraded steam generators

Holtec, the current owner of the Palisades plant, has questionable plans to resolve these issues.

Palisade's reboot comes largely at the behest of Michigan's Governor Whitmer, who is throwing a $150 million subsidy from taxpayers at the plant. This subsidy is contingent on a $1.5 billion loan from the Federal government.

A fully decommissioned nuclear power plant has never been restarted in the so-called U.S., and it is being done by a company which has never run a plant. The plant is, as of August 27, 2025, in an online status, allowing it to receive nuclear fuel and begin producing energy. Holtec's plan is to begin running full reactor cycles before the end of 2025.

Environmental Racism

The nuclear waste factory and storage site known as Palisades exists in so-called Covert, Michigan, on stolen

Bodéwadmi/Neshnabék land. Covert township sits in rural Van Buren county, Michigan, outside of South Haven, Michigan, a popular beach and tourist town. The township is mostly comprised of farmland and a state park that borders the plant. Here, nearly one-third of residents live below the poverty line.

This small town has also been the home of a historically Black community since at least the 1860s; the preceding decades saw Black migration from the southern states to the "free" states in the northern US, but with the American Civil War and "emancipation" from the plantation slavery of the south, this Black migration sharply increased, and continued for generations. This postwar period saw many, both Black and white, move to west Michigan in search of a "new frontier".

"unusable" for anything else and is thus a sunk cost. From this standpoint, it is easy to say that we should fire the plant back up and run it as long as we can.

We do not see land in these terms. When your relatives have been badly harmed, they are to be healed, not further victimized.

Odë Ke // This Land

We touched on this already but it must be stated clearly: the Palisades plant and the land surrounding it is occupied Neshnabék land. It was not some "new frontier" when the settlers came here and set about the destruction of homes, draining swamps, and logging forests. Missions, forced removal, and boarding schools set the stage for colonization to wreak havoc on the land and water. The kidnapping of native children not only separated displaced people from the land; the forced internment of boarding schools attempted to destroy native language, communities, and land-based lifeways.

The land itself around Covert would likely not have been considered "prime real estate" by the white settlers. Much of the area is swamp or other wetland. Dense woods and lack of immediate access to the river would all make logging and settlement difficult and less desirable than other, more established settlements along the lakeshore.

The black migration and the black experience in the so-called US, co-occurring with indigenous life and genocide, weave a story the land tells us all over Turtle Island. Like a weary grandparent, the land whispers. From here, one can listen to the echoes of the Great Dismal Swamp, so far away, and the mind can wonder about the Neshnabék who resisted forced removal, and the people escaping enslavement, embracing the protection the land gladly shared…

-Will the energy this plant generates serve as a form of reparations which redistributes the energy hierarchy in order to fulfill the needs of those most disempowered & disserviced?

-Does anyone actually want to swim in Lake Michigan or live down the shoreline with a nuclear plant and radioactive waste storage right there?

If you're thinking, "some of these questions are way outside of the scope of whether a nuclear plant should operate or not. There is a demand for energy right now!" we want to kindly give you permission to be a little more imaginative. This myopic view of the settler economy's supply & demand will constantly gobble our attention if we let it. And as we continue to follow our current demands for energy and resources, we won't even realize that we're following it right off of a cliff.

We do not need to play "lesser of evils" with our planet's future, or with the health & safety of our communities. To once again quote Andrewism, "GDP provides no indication of the costs associated with its rise. No indication of the pollution, sickness, social despair, and death that fuel its rise and push us over the brink of safe planetary boundaries."

There is much to say on the subjects of anti-capitalism and anti-colonialism, but I would like to take a moment to focus on pluralism. White supremacist systems seek to simplify life into neat, digestible, consumable units; it detests the complex. To spite white supremacy, we must joyfully embrace complexity. There is no better place to do this than with our relationships to the land.

Nuclear energy is the ultimate example of the colonizer's logic of viewing land as something that can be parceled up, commodified, and designated based on "use." Advocates of nuclear see the Palisades as "spent land." Through the damage already done with concrete and radioactive materials, this land is rendered

Despite a series of racist laws across the country coined the "Black Codes," Black people were able to find relative safety in rural Michigan (Covert isn't the only HBC with deeps roots in Michigan: Vandalia, a tiny undergound railroad town just north of the border with Indiana, is another example, with more nearby). Here in Covert, before Black men could legally vote, Dawson Pompey, a farmer whose mother was reportedly enslaved, was elected by his white neighbors to be a "highway overseer," supervising crews of white men as they cut roads through the thick forests.

Pompey wouldn't be the only Black elected official, and the small town would continue to integrate while racial violence exploded throughout the country. Almost a century before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Covert had an integrated schoolhouse due to a white official simply declining to record the race of Black students in school census records. Today Covert Township remains the site of significant Black population, with a sizable Latinx population in recent years as well.

While it's not lost on us that the immediate effects of a disaster at Palisades would disproportionately harm this historically Black community, the environmental racism of this project goes beyond just Covert or even southwest Michigan in general. Nuclear plants like Palisades need appropriate storage to store their spent fuel: highly hazardous and radioactive waste.

While waste is often stored onsite (as is the current case for Palisades), off site storage facilities are often proposed near Indigenous communities, such as the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository on Western Shoshone land in so-called Nevada and the Private Fuel Storage at the Skull Valley Goshute Indian Reservation, so-called Utah. While these projects never came to be (so far), more proposed nuclear waste facilities that could be potential sites of Palisades' waste are popping up near marginalized communities in different places.

One such example is the HI-STORE Consolidated Interim Storage Facility in Lea County, NM brought to you by no other than

Holtec, the current owner of Palisades, as well as another proposed facility in Andrews County, Texas. The population of both counties are majority Latinx.

These are just symptoms of larger systemic issues like environmental racism, colonialism, and ecocide. However, how these forces play out with regards to nuclear energy (or any "clean" energy for that matter) cannot be overlooked. In a 2016 study done by Dean Kyne, there was a larger percentage of Black Americans living within the 50 mile radius of nuclear plants, while there was a larger percentage of whites living outside the 50 mile radius.

Author Klee Benally articulates the racist nature of nuclear energy well in this excerpt from the book *No Spiritual Surrender*:

> The devastation of nuclear colonialism, which permanently destroys Indigenous communities throughout the world, is outright ignored by some of the most devout climate justice advocates. They claim nuclear energy production is also a green solution to the climate crisis. More than 15,000 abandoned uranium mines are located within the so-called US, mostly in and around Indigenous communities, permanently poisoning sacred lands and waters with little to no action being taken to clean up their deadly toxic legacy. There are currently ninety-three operating nuclear reactors in the so-called US that supply 20% of the country's electricity. There are 60,000 tons of highly radioactive spent nuclear waste stored in concrete dams at nuclear power plants throughout the country with the waste increasing at a rate of 2,000 tons per year. In 1987 the "US" Congress initiated a controversial project to transport and store almost all of the US's toxic waste at Yucca Mountain located about 100 miles northwest of so-called Las Vegas, Nevada. Yucca Mountain has been held holy to the Paiute and Western Shoshone Nations since time immemorial. In

Degrowth is a planned, collectively organized **downscaling of energy and resource use** to transition human activity back into balance with the rest of the living world in a safe, just, and equitable way. [definition adapted from Andrewism's]

This process is necessarily anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and pluralistic. We cannot degrow without the destruction of capitalism, the sovereignty of indigenous people, and a diverse approach that is place-based and empowers local communities. The point is not to just, like, take shorter showers or bike to work or some shit. A degrowth worldview draws the relationship between the colonial core and energy/resource use, then seeks to restructure that use. This means that yes, many people would use less energy, but some (in the world's most disenfranchised communities) would use more.

To better articulate this position, let's apply the degrowth lens to nuclear energy (and Palisades specifically). Here are some questions we could ask:

-Do current methods of uranium mining empower Kazakh people, who are extracting almost half of the world's raw uranium? Are the lands where this extraction occurs habitable and comfortable to live in? Do local/indigenous populations have sovereignty over those lands?

-Is the energy intensive process of milling & enrichment actually transitioning us away from fossil fuels?

-Is there a way to dispose of radioactive waste (produced in both enrichment and energy production) with zero chance of impacting the most disempowered communities' air, drinking water, etc.?

-Is producing this much energy necessary, or are there highly energy intensive sectors we can think of (military, mass surveillance, jails & prisons, deportation infrastructure, to name a few) that are actually fucking pointless and could instead be abolished to the overwhelming benefit of our communities?

Degrowth

“If we treat renewable energy the same way we treat fossil fuels to power continued growth and extraction production capacities because ‘oh, it’s clean energy,’ we will continue to expand, fill our landfills, wreck our soils, raze our forests and fisheries, and decimate the biosphere.”

-Andrewism, *How Degrowth Can Save the World*

The reopening of the Palisades plant has largely been championed in the media as a win for renewable energy and a boost to local economies. Actual enormous monetary costs associated with its reopening aside, these claims only hold true in the zero-sum logic of the settler economy. Incalculable costs from the dangers of radioactive materials and their mining, milling, enriching and waste storage must be ignored to believe that nuclear is a renewable source of energy.

But this really comes down to a fallacy baked into all “renewable” energy sources: that there is no cost to the Earth or her inhabitants associated with their production. Rare earth metals must be mined for not just nuclear energy, but solar and wind as well. Currently, it is slave labor-- that of the people of Congo to mine cobalt for batteries, for example-- which extracts many of these materials.

Beyond the historical context of colonial rule which has resulted in a global situation where some people are slaves and others benefit from slave labor, there are other questions: why are such unjust conditions the only way to meet demands for energy? Are we doomed to rely on extractive industry and labor exploitation to meet our needs?

Maybe the problem is demand. And not just demand itself, but the way that global demand is structured.

Enter degrowth.

January 2010 the Obama administration approved a $54 billion taxpayer loan in a guarantee program for new nuclear reactor construction, three times what Bush previously promised in 2005. In April 2022, the Biden administration announced a $6 billion government bailout to “rescue” nuclear power plants at risk of closing. A colonial government representative stated, “US nuclear power plants contribute more than half of our carbon-free electricity, and President Biden is committed to keeping these plants active to reach our clean energy goals.” They, along with Climate Justice activists cite nuclear energy as necessary to combat global warming, all while ignoring the devastating permanent impacts Indigenous Peoples have faced.

There is nothing clean about energy produced from nuclear colonialism. From its weapons (including depleted uranium) to its mining and its waste; Indigenous bodies, lands, and waters continue to be sacrificed to heat water with radioactive materials which creates steam that moves generators to charge batteries made from lithium extracted from other Indigenous sacred lands so Teslas can move you forward into a “just” climate future.

From Covert Township to the Navajo Nation to Aboriginal communities in Australia to Kazakhstan and beyond, marginalized communities bear the brunt of capitalist progress, which include "clean" energy solutions like nuclear. Perhaps the bigger issue is not whether our energy is "clean", but whether we need energy to continue the ever-consuming death march of capitalist progress until there's nothing left for it to devour and destroy?

Leaking From the Start: Steam Generators

In 1973, just one year after it initially opened, Palisades experienced its first forced closure. The reactor's steam generator had sprung pinhole leaks, requiring a massive system replacement. The plant was down for 19 months as they replaced 27,000 leaking tubes. In 2006, Consumers said that they needed to replace the steam generator's tubes again, but this was never done. Holtec now plans to sleeve the tubes instead of replacing them, a process which compromises rigor to cuts costs, and yet will still be quite expensive.

Still, with the plant slated to run a full reactor cycle before 2026, the repair hasn't yet occurred.

Dry Casks // Doom Casks

The plant's nuclear waste has been in dry cask storage since 1993. In 1994, a whistleblower from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), Dr. Ross Landsman, came forward with allegations of the precarious nature of the dry cask's steel reinforced concrete pads. These pads are placed on 55 feet of loose sand, completely without anchoring. He wrote:

"Actually, its (sic) the consequences that might occur from an earthquake that I'm concerned about. The casks can either fall into Lake Michigan or be buried in the loose sand because of liquefaction…It is apparent to me that NMSS [NRC Office of Nuclear Material Safety and Safeguards] doesn't realize the catastrophic consequences of their continued reliance on their current ideology."

They continue:

> In regards to Nuclear energy: its cost is expensive per kWH compared to other energy because you have to hire multiple people with Masters or Doctorates, with decades of experience in order to meet the minimum qualifications to run a place. This means that private companies are incentivized to meet exactly the minimums on everything, meaning the general workplace culture is controlling and generally stressful. There is a bit of a meme where you want to hire fresh PhD students because they are already used to working 60 hours a week for poverty wages in academia so any tiny improvement is a huge upgrade for them. This tends to get you people who don't have enough experience, or even really an established culture of safety.
>
> That's my biggest concern about Palisades, really. They have a track record of going forward with things even if they're dubious, then ad hoc meeting regulations with it. It's normal for things to come up in inspections from the NRC, but doing it consistently (especially with what sounds like returning workers, who may bring that culture back with them despite a company change) is worrisome.

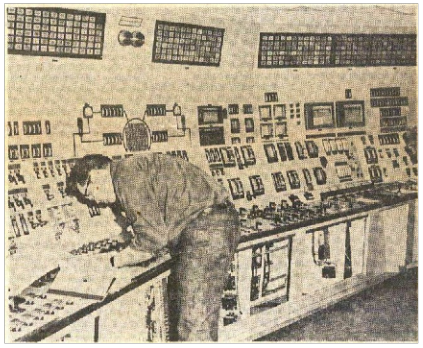
This intersection is a fascinating one. In a uranium-tinged renaissance of the images of an industrial revolution coal mine, we instead have lab techs hunched over control panels, worked to the bone on a skeleton crew: all at the risk of the lives and habitability of an entire region and the world's largest source of fresh surface water. The capitalist system's relentless pursuit of efficiency & cost-cutting will always result in such situations-- it's something we just can't regulate our way out of.

Holtec plans to transfer the casks to a newer pad, which is closer to Van Buren State Park, is still on loose sand, and is also untethered.

Adding to the precarious nature of spent fuel storage, in 1994, dry cask #4 was noted to contain welding flaws. Consumers Energy (who owned and operated the plant at the time) announced that they would move the radioactive waste back into indoor pool storage, where spent fuel is initially stored. Here is an excerpt from *A People's History of the Palisades Atomic Reactor*:

> Consumers could not grind through the sealed lid of the defective storage cask, remove pressure-fit shims, transfer the waste into a radiation shielded transfer container, transport it to the pool, and lower it in, all in less than 40 hours. This meant technical specifications would be violated, including overheating of the waste, due to interruption of the storage cask's convection air current cooling design. Even once the contained waste entered the 100 degree Fahrenheit storage pool cooling water, the package would now be hotter than 750 degrees F, resulting in a radioactive steam flash (the pool water is radioactively contaminated to some extent), as well as thermal shock to the package, risking degradation. Consumers backed off its unloading pledge. To this day, 30 years later, defective dry cask #4 remains fully loaded with highly radioactive waste, precariously close to Lake Michigan.

Labor: Skeleton Crews on the Zombie Nuke

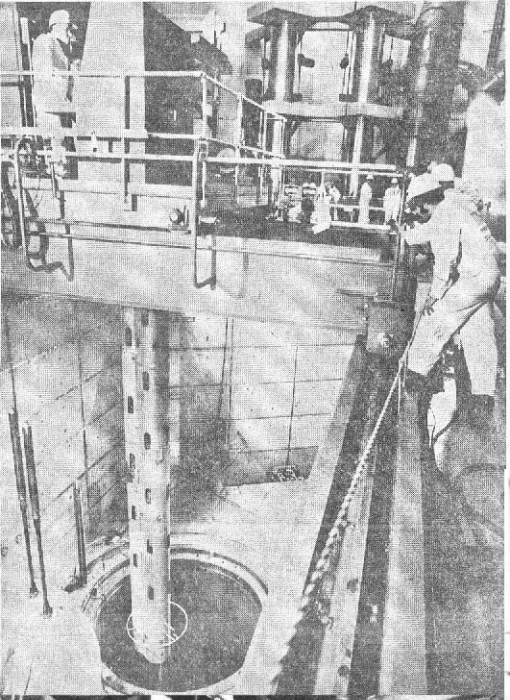


One of the authors of this zine has a dear lifelong friend who grew up about a 15 minute drive away from the Palisades plant and now happens to be a nuclear physicist. (They were actually one of the friends in the story from the introduction of swimming in the reactor cooling waters as children.) They currently work in nuclear research at a university. I reached out to them thinking that they would have a unique perspective on Palisades. This friend, to be clear, is an advocate of nuclear energy.

The conversation began with them saying that they had looked over the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's (NRC) reports on emissions & effluent release, and that these looked fine. I listed the above issues that I had heard reports of, and we went back and forth about these for a while. There were aspects of these issues that we disagreed about the seriousness of, while they shared my concerns over others.

They brought up some things, though, that I wasn't even aware of which tied labor to public health & safety. In their words:

> Chatted with some friends who worked in energy sector today. Their big concern with Palisades is how a lot of the general energy people hired in just the last decade or so are usually not as qualified as prior years, and motivated differently. Maybe it's old men being grumpy but it's a worthy discussion because relying on instrumentation rather than expert analysis (which can only be done if you've got expensive, time consuming education) is what causes stuff like Chernobyl. Keeping costs of energy low forcing skeleton crews and fucked up relations to labor and work and all that.




WE
ARE
NOT SAFE
Remember
Fukushima?