

As Indian Point shuts down for good, workers wish for more years, talked about defeat

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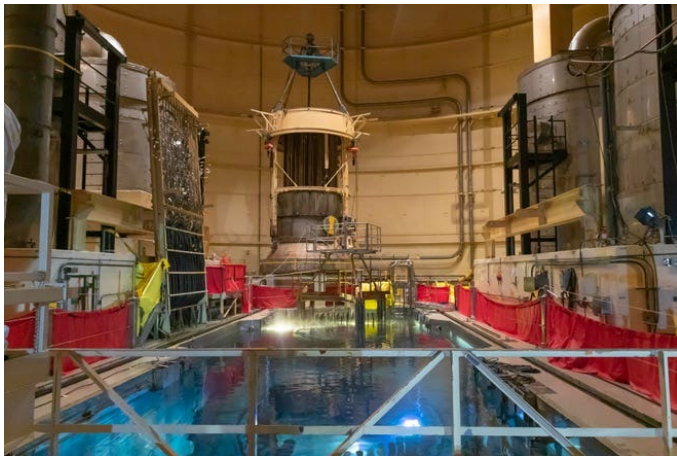
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Brian Vangor arrived at the Indian Point nuclear power plant in 1980 fresh off the campus of Manhattan College with a hard-earned degree in mechanical engineering.

He soon discovered he wasn't welcome.

Back then, the control rooms of nuclear power plants were stocked with military veterans who'd learned their trade on the nation's fleet of nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers. They weren't about to listen to a 22-year-old.

"We were young, and we didn't know much, and the control room was a little resentful of us at the time and they didn't talk to us much," Vangor laughingly recalled. "It was, 'Who are these kids and why are they here and why do they think they know more than I do? I ran a nuclear submarine for six years.'"



The year before, a mishap at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear power plant stoked fears of nuclear disaster across the nation. Federal regulators decided nuclear plants needed an engineer on every shift. Enter Vangor and five others with a college-level understanding of thermodynamics. They were given the title shift technical adviser.

Vangor ended up learning more from the military vets than they did from him.

"They eventually warmed up to us and taught us this plant," Vangor recalls.

Three years later he was doing their job.

Now 63, Vangor, raised in Yonkers, has spent 41 years at the nuclear power plant in Buchanan. He guesses he knows every pipe and valve in the place, from his work as a control room operator and as the plant's unofficial photographer, peeking into places with his camera that few outside ever see.



But in the coming months Vangor takes on a new job – the teardown of a place that's been his life for four decades.

Unit 3, the last of Indian Point's two working reactors, shuts down next Friday, after 45 years generating electricity for Westchester County and New York City. This week, the

reactor was working at 78 percent of its capacity and will likely get down to 67 percent before it turns off for good.

For longtime workers, that moment comes too soon. Their frustration with how things are ending is accompanied by a gnawing sense that if only outsiders had taken the time to learn more about how the plant operates, they might have seen things differently.

They believed the plant still had plenty of good years left. In its last two years, Unit 3 set a record for light water reactors with 742 continuous days in operation.

“When I started here, we all got mugs for 129 days,” Vangor mused. “It took 40 years but we’ve kind of got this down now.”

Support for Indian Point has always been strongest closest to the plant, among workers and in Buchanan, the village where Indian Point's 240 acres sit along the banks of the Hudson River some 35 miles north of New York City. The village and the town of Cortlandt relied on Indian Point's property taxes to help pay for top-shelf municipal services.



Beyond Indian Point's gates, among environmental groups and in Albany, support was harder to come by.

Last week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo used a portion of his daily chat with reporters to recall his history with Indian Point

the past 25 years, beginning with his time as attorney general.

He said his opposition had little to do with nuclear power. Indeed, some four years ago his administration agreed to a nearly \$8 billion bailout so three upstate nuclear power plants – two in Oswego County and one near Rochester – could remain operating.

“Closing Indian Point was at one time one of the main progressive causes in this state,” Cuomo said. “It’s not being against nuclear power. We have nuclear power plants in this state. It’s that Indian Point is the nuclear power plant that is located closest to the most densely populated area on the globe. So number one, it was the location of Indian Point. Number two it was the safety factor of Indian Point.”

“The evacuation plan for the region is virtually impossible,” he added. “The Westchester County emergency plan at that time was to give everybody an iodine pill.”



Fossil fuels could fill the energy void

Legal challenges from the state of New York and Riverkeeper, an environmental group opposed to the plant, dogged the plant’s owners, Entergy, for decades.

In 2017, with the cheap price of natural gas making it increasingly difficult to compete in the energy market, Entergy announced it would shut down. The state agreed to drop its challenges.

There are currently 750 workers at Indian Point, from 1,000 during the busiest years. Of those, some 312 will take jobs with Holtec, the New Jersey-based decommissioning firm with a deal to buy the plant from Entergy, for the first phase of the shutdown.

Another 170 have taken jobs at other Entergy sites around the country, company spokesman Jerry Nappi says.

The number of union workers has dwindled in recent years to 300, with retirements and jobs not filled.

Some 120 union workers will take jobs with Holtec. The rest have retired or taken jobs with Entergy’s other facilities in Arkansas, Mississippi or Louisiana, according to James Shillitto, the president of Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers Union of America, which represents Indian Point workers.

“It’s a huge loss to the union, it a huge loss to the workforce in that area,” Shillitto said.

Shillitto questions why the governor would pursue a shutdown strategy, considering the administration’s goal of 100-percent carbon free electricity in the state by 2040. For the immediate future, the power generated by Indian Point, will be picked up by natural gas plants in the region, Shillitto said.

“They’ve got to get 1,000 megawatts of clean energy just to break even and they’re replacing it in the short term with fossil fuel plants,” Shillitto said. “I’m not happy about it. It’s a plan that satisfied certain interests and now it’s coming back to look like it wasn’t a good plan. Had Indian Point still been viable, that environmental push to no more gas would have been easier to accomplish.”

In 2019, when the plant’s two reactors were shut down for several weeks – one for a refueling and the other for a malfunction – an analysis by The Journal News /lohud.com found that fossil fuel picked up the slack on the grid.

But environmentalists say renewables like solar and wind power have increased their share of the state’s energy output after Indian Point’s Unit 2 reactor shut down in April 2020.

And, they say, the addition of more renewable power and efficiencies in the next four years will more than replace Unit 3. They predict clean energy resources totaling more than twice Indian Point’s output will come available, reducing the state’s reliance on natural gas.

"As the nuclear era ends in downstate New York, we are seeing an acceleration of clean energy," said Jessica Azulay, executive director of Alliance for a Green Economy. "The data shows renewables and efficiency are able to replace nuclear and gas plants. We are turning the corner on the old, dirty energy paradigm, and there's no need and no reason to go back to fossil or nuclear."

On Wednesday, the alliance joined Riverkeeper and others in calling on Cuomo to ban permits for new fossil fuel power plants.

Shillitto says the plant’s future was dictated by those with unrealistic fears of nuclear power.

“They (workers) didn’t have those fears,” he said. “The public did because they’re misinformed due to politicians or environmentalists who talk off the cuff and Hollywood movies that make it seem like it could happen. They talk about Fukushima or Chernobyl, which is not anywhere near the situation we’d have in New York.”

“They (the workers) feel defeated,” he added. “They know that they operated a good, reliable and safe plant. And it was closed because of fear, mostly. People’s fears.”



Biting his tongue at NRC meetings

Every year, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission held public meetings on Indian Point’s record – a report card on the plant’s

successes and failures.

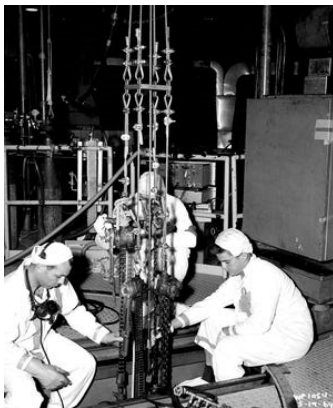
The annual event, typically held at a Tarrytown hotel, became an opportunity for those on both sides of the nuclear debate to voice their concerns to federal regulators.

In 2016, the year before the shutdown was announced, advocates urged the NRC to challenge a gas company’s plans to expand a pipeline to the area around Indian Point. Indian Point workers turned out in opposition, wearing t-shirts that read “Indian Point Powers New York.”

Dan Cooke, who started working at the plant in 1998, was among those who regularly attended. He found it hard to keep quiet.

“I used to go all the NRC meetings every year and roll my eyes and bite my tongue,” Cooke said. “Especially now when everyone wants to cut down carbon emissions why are these plants closing at a time when they need it more than ever? Here’s 2,000 megawatts of zero carbon emissions and you’re closing them?”

Before taking a job at Indian Point, Cooke, 66, worked at nuclear power plants from Maine to California, assisting in the weeks-long process of removing old fuel and replacing it with new, a process known as a refueling.



At Indian Point, he has supervised the work of electricians, pipe fitters and carpenters.

And so he had a front row seat to how a nuclear power plant operates. “People who aren’t aware of the intricacies of nuclear power, they don’t understand the fail-safe modes and redundant systems we have,” he said.

In a few months, Cooke will be in charge of safety for Holtec at Indian Point. The job is expected to last at least through 2033.

All three of the plant's reactors will be demolished, including Unit 1 which opened in 1962 and shut down in the mid-1970s. Unit 2 opened in 1974 and Unit 3 two years later. Together, units 2 and 3 generated about 2,000 megawatts of electricity, enough for 500,000 homes.

Vangor will head up a team of workers responsible for loading spent fuel removed from cooling pools and securing them in the cement and steel dry casks arrayed on a site that runs along the Hudson River.

Long after Holtec demolishes many of Indian Point's buildings and containment domes, the fuel will remain there until the federal government comes up with a plan to relocate the nation's nuclear waste from dozens of nuclear power plants across the U.S.

Vangor, for one, thinks Indian Point had many good years left.

"The plant itself was designed by very smart people so that people like me and others could operate it without being nuclear scientists," he said. "This plant was designed extremely well and then built extremely well to be able to withstand all sorts of problems and it really took care of us all these years."



When he tells folks he works at Indian Point, most people have a similar reaction.

"I don't go out in the world and argue nuclear power with people," Vangor said. "I just don't do it. I just don't have the ambition anymore. When I was younger, I went to meetings and town halls. Nowadays everybody is asking why are they shutting that plant down? That's the comment I get from people in my world. And I don't mean friends. People are saying, 'They're making a mistake shutting that plant down.'"

There are days he thinks back to 1980 in the years when nuclear power plants were being built across the nation and he was just a few years out of college.

"It was a bright future still," he said. "We had very little doubt and we had very little anticipation this plant would not be here for a long time. We thought we'd be here forever and we were. All my friends are now long gone, retired. I'm the last one."