

On the Chernobyl Project

By Paul Buhle

Excerpt from INSURGENT IMAGES, THE AGITPROP MURALS OF MIKE ALEWITZ, 2002

CHERNOBYL IN 1996, marking the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster which flooded the Ukraine with nuclear poisons and spread deadly fallout across Europe, Alewitz traveled to Slavutich, a “model city” built to house the surviving and newly imported workers. Dedicated to those workers who perished in their attempts to prevent a worse disaster, the mural was sponsored by the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers Unions along with local energy workers.



Mural Banner held by Ukrainians, 1996

The result was like nothing else he had done before. A technician wearing a protective face mask, with hair ambiguously flowing behind a head that could be either male or female, holds out hands clutching a wire (strung in turn to a transmitter or generator) with sparking ends; representing the martyred workers who had given their lives to save others. An alternative transportable, canvas mural depicts the same worker with a saying overhead: “We shall bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old,” favorite lines of the venerable IWW song, “Solidarity Forever,” obviously relevant now in new ways. Not surprisingly, given the nuclear industry’s record for denial, the mural had a rocky course of creation.

Originally proposed by the International Chemical Workers’ Union (ICEM) to raise the popular discussion of nuclear power, and embracing the progressive position that nuclear workers should be trained to decommission the industry out of existence, the mural project arrived at a troubled and badly divided labor scene. City officials in the new, post-meltdown district near Chernobyl greeted Alewitz so cheerily, wined and dined him so continuously that he became suspicious. Sure enough, they were hoping to distract him by using up all of his time in the Ukraine because of their concern that his drawing (of workers in protective gear) actually suggested that nuclear power had safety problems!

Approaching the end of his stay, he threatened to hold a press conference on the tenth anniversary of the tragedy, and quietly created an alternative, transportable canvas mural that he presented to unionists still working at Chernobyl. Meanwhile, local unionists joined by local residents simply built two concrete walls in the new town center and told him to proceed with the murals. The city covered up the murals shortly before completion and put out armed guards to prevent their unveiling for the international press—then relented and agreed to a union-run referendum on the murals’ survival.

As time went on, they remained on display, albeit under threat. Alewitz and the Chernobyl survivors, and

labor art in general, had won a small victory (the portable mural also remained on hand in Chernobyl). It was also a reminder that, as with the Pathfinder mural and Rivera's 1930s murals, public art remains dangerous to authorities who patronize art that is comfortable to them, but seek to permit no visual symbols of opposition.