

Why 'Green' Germany Remains Addicted to Coal

By Melissa Eddy

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COTTBUS, Germany — On a Sunday in September, at the moment when part of the nearby coal-fired power station went dark for good, 600 people lifted white miner's helmets from their heads and placed them on folding chairs in the main square in Cottbus, an industrial town in eastern Germany.

It was a silent protest to mark the number of jobs lost.

"You have to think that every one of those places represents a job, an income that an entire family depends on," said Mathias Felsch, a 26-year-old whose father and grandfather both worked in the coal mines. "When you see it like that, it really is a whole lot."

Even so, for Germany, it is not nearly enough.

If the country is to meet its commitment to the Paris Climate Accord — to reduce carbon emissions by 80 to 95 percent by 2050 — it must also address the economic and social impact on the roughly 22,500 people whose jobs depend on coal.

Increasingly, for Chancellor Angela Merkel it is a question of wavering political will in the face of mounting challenges, including from the far right, in eastern regions where a bulk of those jobs would be lost.

More than 15 years ago, Germany embarked on an ambitious plan to shift to renewable energy sources. Promoting that energy transformation, known as the Energiewende, helped earn Ms. Merkel international admiration and the moniker of "the climate chancellor."

Yet even as Ms. Merkel was a leader in setting ambitious targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and decided in the wake of the Fukushima disaster to shutter the country's nuclear plants by 2022, successive governments under her leadership have failed to take the necessary, painful political decisions to quit coal.

"In the past Chancellor Merkel has been seen as the 'climate chancellor,' riding on the wave of renewable energy successes," said Jennifer Morgan, a director of Greenpeace International. "But unless she turns her full attention to reducing emissions in Germany, particularly from coal, with clear support for a phaseout of coal by 2030, her legacy will not be green. It will be dirty brown."

Today, nearly a quarter of all electricity produced in Germany still comes from burning lignite, often called brown coal, one of the dirtiest fossil fuels, making Germany the world's leader in the mining and burning of lignite, according to the International Energy Agency.

That record runs contrary to a United Nations report released Monday, which found that time is running out for action as global temperatures are rising much faster than previously understood. The dire report, compiled by 91 scientists from 40 countries, recommended "phasing out coal in the energy sector."

For Ms. Merkel, the news could not have come at a worse time. Already, in August, the environment ministry said the country will fail to meet its ambitious targets to cut carbon emissions to 40 percent of 1990 levels by 2020.

The pressure to save her country's international reputation comes as Ms. Merkel faces an unexpectedly strong challenge from the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, the leading opposition party, which has questioned Germany's national consensus on the role humans play in contributing to climate change.

The party is particularly strong in three of the eastern states where mining regions sit, where the economy is among the weakest, and where sensitivities run deep over a history of economic displacement since reunification of the country in the 1990s.

"People here remember the trauma of losing nine out of 10 jobs with the changes that happened after the collapse of communism," said Philipp Zirzow, a leader of the union representing local coal workers. "Now they are supposed to experience that all over again."

Mr. Zirzow helped organize the miners' protest in front of city hall in Cottbus, the capital of eastern German coal country, over the closing of Block F of Jänschwalde power station. Government promises to bring industrial jobs to replace those lost never materialized, further angering and alienating people, he said.

An estimated 7,800 jobs are dependent on the mines in Lusatia, a region abutting Poland, where Cottbus is situated and memories of the 2.5 million people put out of work after the fall of the Berlin Wall remain acute. Some 1,900 jobs are at stake in another nearby mining region in eastern Germany.

In addition, 8,900 people work in the country's other main mining region, in the heavily industrial state of North Rhine-Westphalia, a critical testing ground for Ms. Merkel's Christian Democratic Party.

In June, Ms. Merkel's government convened a 31-member commission to "work together with affected regions" to recommend the best ways to quit coal. Members are to arrive in Lusatia on Thursday.

Dozens of studies published in recent years suggest a transition to renewable energy sources, while keeping the lights on and people in work, is possible. With the exception of Spain, all of Germany's western European partners have already quit coal, or are on track to do so.

"We have the technology," said Jochen Flasbarth, a state secretary in Germany's ministry for the environment, who is considered a father of the country's shift to renewable energy.

Germany will need to expand its power grid to help carry electricity generated by turbines in the windy northern states to the industrial regions farther south, said Patrick Graichen, director of Agora Energiewende, a think tank focused on the shift to renewable energy.

"Between now and 2030, there are still 12 years, so a government can speed up processes and get things done," Mr. Graichen said.

The situation in the former East Germany is especially difficult. Creating jobs there would require attracting new investors to the region which, despite being only 80 miles east of Berlin, has only a single-track railway connecting it to the capital and little industry beyond lignite.

One of the biggest employers is LEAG, which owns and operates several mines and power plants, providing 8,000 jobs.

Hanna Buchmann and Nora Gundermann, both 18, started traineeships there in August and believe the company can offer them a future.

"LEAG offered the best opportunities and the best pay. They are really the only company here in the region," said Ms. Buchmann, who took part in the demonstration in Cottbus.

Tensions are playing out in western Germany as well. Last month, a dispute over the power company RWE's plan to clear half of a 500-acre forest to expand the Hambach lignite mine exploded into a clash between the police and protesters who had been squatting in tree houses and tents.

The events threatened to derail the commission's work, after representatives from environmental groups threatened to quit the body unless RWE halted the clearing. The power company refused, until a court ordered it to suspend the plans pending a further ruling, not expected before 2020.

While the company warned of "far-reaching ramifications," environmental activists celebrated the ruling as a first step in the difficult decision of how to wean Germany off its most significant and abundant fossil fuel.

"Hambach has become a symbol for the fight against coal," said Dirk Jansen, the general manager for the regional chapter of Friends of the Earth Germany, which filed the suit. "The final match for brown coal has begun."