

French research

Trouble brews in the ranks

NEW regulations demanding more teaching from lecturers (for the same pay) and a leak of the long-awaited regulations which appear to restrict the career hopes of technicians were causing French university researchers and laboratory technicians to feel distinctly unhappy at the end of last week. Technicians in a major research area at Grenoble, traditionally the thermometer of feeling in the research ranks, immediately went on protest strike for an hour on Friday. And in Paris, the head of a scientific department in the university said he would have to "cheat" the proposed new teaching regulations, announced by the government last Wednesday, if his research was not to suffer. If the government gets its way, the new regulations will take effect this autumn.

In Grenoble, the technicians had learned that the new rules affecting them — unpublished but now before the Prime Minister, Pierre Mauroy, for approval — were "completely different" from the grading and salary agreements that had been negotiated over two years with the previous research minister, Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

According to the director of a Grenoble physics laboratory, the unions seem to have been treated "very badly" by the new minister, Laurent Fabius. They had assumed that the regulations before Mauroy were the ones negotiated; now it seems they are not, and that key problems dealt with in the Chevènement rules — such as the present lack of promotion or salary advancement for good work once a technician has reached mid-career — remain unresolved in the Fabius version. Indeed, regulations proposed by Pierre Aigrain, the science minister of the previous (conservative) president, Giscard d'Estaing, might have been more acceptable, it is being said in Grenoble. "As a director of a laboratory, I really hope the government will restart negotiations", the Grenoble physicist said last week. Otherwise, research in Grenoble and throughout France seems to be threatened with disruption by strikes.

Among university lecturers and professors, tension now centres on the new teaching demands of four hours of lectures per week for 32 weeks compared with three hours for 25 weeks at present. At the same time, the institution of paid *heures complémentaires* — essentially overtime teaching — which cost the ministry of education FF 100 million (£8.7 million) a year to finance, is to be abolished. Student numbers are also to increase.

The result is complicated, and will vary greatly from discipline to discipline. In the humanities, for example, where most *heures complémentaires* are taken, the net effect may be to reduce lecturer's take-home pay. But in the hard sciences there is little tradition of teaching *heures comple-*

mentaires, lecturers preferring to devote the time to research. So in such disciplines the net increase in teaching load seems likely to be compensated by a reduction in research time. An increase in the number of statutory managing committees in university departments from two to three, defined in the new higher education law (which has passed its hurdles in the National Assembly and goes to the Senate in September) is likely to have the same effect: to reduce the time for research.

Unless, that is, people feel inclined to fool the system, like the University of Paris professor, who will be over-claiming on administration time and counting as teaching time "any time when there's a single

student in my laboratory". This, he admits, is not the best solution, but nothing else — other than new regulations — would allow him time for research. He — like many of his colleagues — is bitter at the contrast in treatment between the universities and the *grandes écoles*, the tiny engineering schools where France trains its elite but where with few exceptions little research is done. The *grandes écoles* are virtually untouched by the higher education law and the new regulations.

The consequence has been a sharp swing of mood among French scientists, especially those whose votes helped to bring in the present government in May 1981. In Chevènement's time, there was great excitement and, as the physicist said last week, "people in research were told they were the best. But now," he added, "all that seems to have gone." **Robert Walgate**

French nuclear tests

Invitation to Mururoa on table

Canberra

A SPECIAL envoy of President François Mitterrand of France has invited each independent South Pacific state to send a scientist to the French nuclear testing site at Mururoa Atoll. The invitation marks a change in policy by the French Government which has hitherto been insensitive to protests at the testing of its "independent nuclear deterrent" in the South Pacific.

M. Régis Debray, personal adviser to the President, was sent on the mission to defend nuclear testing and to defuse tension in the region before the South Pacific Forum meeting in Canberra which has on its agenda the nuclear tests and independence for French New Caledonia. Debray's trip follows soon after the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Bob Hawke, protested in person to the President and suspended a shipment of uranium bound for France from Queensland, in early June. The fate of the whole export contract with France is now in doubt. Although there is little doubt that the French were planning some concessions of the kind offered by Debray before the Hawke visit and although France is not dependent upon Australian supplies of uranium, the top-level meeting in Paris may have hastened the French gesture. Certainly France regards suspension of uranium shipments as "an unfriendly act".

The French offer to open the site to inspection, strictly a one-off affair, does not in fact amount to much. If taken up by South Pacific countries — the invitation extends to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Western Samoa and Tuvalu as well as Australia and New Zealand — the delegation will visit the site only after the testing is over for the year. Furthermore, Debray says "the French Government draws an absolute distinction between inspection and monitoring", which implies

that the scientists may be severely restricted in what they might do. It is not clear at this stage if the scientists may take along equipment nor how long they may stay. Conceivably, the delegation may be able to tell whether the atoll is sinking, cracking, or both, under the strain of the testing, as has been alleged by anti-nuclear groups. However, all previous geological, meteorological and radiation data, which would be needed for comparison, have been compiled by the French.

New Zealand, which has long been pressing for an observer at the tests, has taken up the invitation with alacrity, and Dr Hugh Atkinson, a radiologist of the New Zealand National Radiation Laboratory, has been asked to head the delegation of scientists. As a further concession to New Zealand, some French technical information, denied in the past, will be made available to the laboratory.

Australia's position is rather more complicated, and it has not so far taken up the French offer for fear it may be interpreted as a tacit acceptance of the tests, although the federal cabinet is expected to discuss the matter soon. The government has to appease a strong, restless, anti-nuclear left-wing faction in caucus that has been less than happy with the recent granting of uranium mining contracts to two companies in face of promises that no new uranium contracts be entered into. In addition, Australia will push for a nuclear-free zone in the South Pacific in the coming meeting of South Pacific Forum countries, and vigorously campaign for a comprehensive test ban treaty in the United Nations.

Against this backdrop, the cabinet may well try to extract more concessions from the French, using export contracts with France as a lever, such as asking for an increased number of scientists and greater freedom to conduct experiments.

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