

Soviet policy

Gorbachev on science

SOVIET scientists, and, indeed, Soviet society at large, must pay greater attention to the challenge of modern technology, according to the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Addressing the Central Committee last December, in place of the ailing Konstantin Chernenko, Gorbachev noted that although in many enterprises and scientific institutions research and development problems are resolved "up to the standards of the world's top achievements", many "collectives" are still satisfied with repeating what has been outstripped in world practice.

Paramount importance, Gorbachev told the Central Committee, must be attached to the strategy for developing scientific, technical and production potential, and, in particular, to "fundamentally new and really revolutionary scientific and technical solutions" which will increase labour productivity many times over.

This has been standard party policy for some time; what is, perhaps, significant is Gorbachev's emphasis on the idea that scientific and technological progress can be achieved only by raising the "cultural and technical standard" of the working class and peasantry, and "a radical improvement in the training and perfecting of society's main productive force". This, he said, will entail a major restructuring of the "cadre training system" at all levels of education from primary school up to university. This work is already under way, he noted, but "must acquire a large-scale character".

Educational reform, in particular the changes introduced in September 1984, is apparently a subject in which Gorbachev takes a special interest. One of his last major engagements before his elevation to the general secretaryship was to chair a meeting of the Commission on the Reform of General and Vocational Education. The 1984 reforms stress "practical labour training, and vocational orientation" for all school-children, and the appropriate production ministries are expected to help provide necessary facilities. The February meeting of the commission, however, found that the All-Union Ministry of Light Industry and a number of light industry ministries in the union republics have in many cases contented themselves with drawing up "plans for measures and instructions". Local government officials and education committees, likewise, have been doing little to implement the reform.

This slackness, the commission decided, will not do. Within the next two to three years, it warned, all school-children must be properly involved in socially useful and productive labour, and at the same time, all secondary-school pupils must be computer-literate. Vera Rich

Bendectin/Debendox

Drug not guilty, says court

Washington

A FEDERAL jury last week decided that there is no evidence to link Bendectin, an anti-nausea drug used in pregnancy, and birth defects. The court, in Cincinnati, Ohio, dismissed a case brought by 1,100 women across the country, representing two-thirds of outstanding US claims against Merrel Dow pharmaceuticals, the maker of the drug.

A spokesman for the company said the decision established that a product liability case could be successfully defended in the United States and indicated that Merrel-Dow will now be in no mood to propose no-liability settlements in the remaining cases. Earlier, the company had offered \$120 million in settlement of all outstanding and future claims.

Bendectin (known in the United Kingdom as Debendox) was available as a prescription drug in the United States from 1956 to 1983, when it was withdrawn by the company because of high insurance premiums resulting from the accumulating claims and the bad publicity. Merrel Dow says that no fewer than 27 epidemiological studies have failed to turn up any evidence that the drug causes birth defects. The active ingredients are doxylamine (an anti-

histamine) and vitamin B6. Before 1976, Bendectin also contained dicyclamine, which was removed because of insufficient evidence that it added to efficacy.

The Cincinnati ruling is the third courtroom vindication for Merrel Dow. A case in Florida in 1981 was decided in the company's favour; in 1983 a jury in Washington DC awarded one plaintiff \$750,000 damages but was overruled by the trial judge. The publicity made Bendectin a potential bonanza for tort lawyers, some of whom started to advertise for parents of children with birth defects who might have been affected by Bendectin.

Recognizing that the mass of litigation threatened to clog the legal system, the trial judge in the most recent case took the innovative step of holding a common issues trial to decide questions relevant to all the 1,100 plaintiffs. In an attempt to avoid having to face future litigation on Bendectin, Merrel Dow offered \$120 million as a class settlement to cover all future claims. The offer was accepted by the majority of attorneys in the case but was challenged by some dissidents; the class settlement was then disallowed by an appeal court on a technicality, necessitating the trial that ended last week. Tim Beardsley

Soviet Union

More nuclear research

THE Dubna Joint Nuclear Research Institute in the Soviet Union is to expand its area of research considerably during the coming five-year plan (1986-1990), its director, Academician Nikolai N. Bogolyubov, announced last month. Addressing a meeting of government plenipotentiaries of the 11 member states of the institute (the 10 Comecon partners plus North Korea), Bogolyubov noted that during the next five-year plan "great attention" would be paid to identifying applied work, using the results of fundamental research in related spheres of science and technology, in particular medicine, geology, biology, metallurgy and ecology.

Applicability of fundamental work is a keystone of Soviet science policy, and in a formal keynote speech need not have anything other than a purely ritual significance. Bogolyubov, moreover, has a background in fundamental mathematics and physics and has just been awarded the Lomonosov medal, the highest honour of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, for his theoretical work. Nevertheless, at a time when Comecon research plans in all fields are being closely coordinated, the commitment of Dubna to finding new applications for its research probably represents a genuine statement of intent, especially for the less prosperous member countries.

In his speech, Bogolyubov put con-

siderable emphasis on the "powerful experimental base" that Dubna has acquired in recent years, including the "unique" pulsed neutron fast reactor which came into operation last year, and the plans for the construction of a nucleotron — a superconducting accelerator with the aid of which, he claimed, it will be possible to accelerate nuclei of virtually all the elements in the Mendeleev table, right up to uranium. Dubna's latest achievement, announced shortly before the February summit, also lies in the theoretical field: the creation of element 108. According to the official announcements, in the spring of 1984, in work on the new U-400 cyclotron at Dubna, 44 cases of the decay of three isotopes of element 108 were recorded.

In spite of the "experimental base" praised by Academician Bogolyubov, however, not all is well at Dubna. The central computer centre, in particular, seems to be inadequate, judging from the stress placed on the need to enlarge its capacity. The "instrument centres" of the various laboratories, too, need to be expanded.

● The Soviet Union, of course, has other atomic research institutes. Foremost among these is the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy in Moscow which, says Academician Evgenii Velikhov, has a considerable lead over the West in fusion research.

Vera Rich