

news in brief

Unions refuse to enter plutonium areas at Aldermaston:

Management at the UK weapons research plant at Aldermaston has tried unsuccessfully to reopen work areas that have been closed since last August when 12 workers were found with excessive plutonium in their lungs. According to a spokesman from the Ministry of Defence the buildings are open in the active areas but restaffing of the buildings "has not been achieved". The MOD says that the issue under negotiation is danger pay but that it would be "inappropriate to disclose the details". According to the *Observer* (18 February) the unions are demanding £10 per day and management is offering 13p per hr. Bob King, shop steward of the Transport and General Workers Union at Aldermaston, the largest of the four unions involved, says the issue is not danger pay. "We've never said that. It's a term adopted by the newspapers." The TGWU is demanding that the area be made safe before they will allow their members to work in it. The unions will rely on health specialists in their national offices as well as local staff experience to insure that reasonable safety standards are met.

KGB clamps down on Sunday seminar:

Reports from Moscow indicate new KGB pressure against the Sunday scientific seminar for refuseniks. It is feared that the authorities may be trying to stamp out the seminar altogether—perhaps before the Einstein centenary next month focuses attention on the Jewish contribution to science.

A criminal file, No. 41035/38-75, has been opened on Viktor Brailovskii, the seminar leader, and a certain Avram Yoffe, from Leningrad. One of the people questioned in connection with this file was told by the interrogators that charges were being formulated and a trial could be expected "quite soon". One disturbing fact is that the investigations have been extended to the non-refuseniks who have been attending the seminar.

Budget cuts threaten London medical schools:

Lord Annan, Vice Chancellor of London University has set up a working party to investigate the financial viability of the University's 12 general medical schools, five dental schools and 13 postgraduate teaching and research institutes. Chaired by Sir Brian Flowers, Rector of Imperial College, the working party is to investigate the effects of further reductions in funds to the university and will prepare plans for the closing of specific schools if it finds this necessary. The action was taken after the Joint Medical Advisory Committee heard numerous complaints that budget cuts were impairing the quality of training. The university trains 30% of British doctors. In 1977/1978 8,250 medical and dental students were enrolled, of which 6,700 were undergraduates and 1,550 were postgraduates.

UK to build amateur spacecraft:

Amateur radio enthusiasts at the University of Surrey are to build the UK's first amateur spacecraft—a satellite carrying a series of high frequency beacons which will be used by radio amateurs to study the effects of the ionosphere on radio-wave propagation. It is to be built in close collaboration with the international Amateur Satellite Corporation (AMSAT), the Amateur Satellite Organisation of the UK (AMSAT-UK) and the Radio

Society of Great Britain. At an estimated cost of £150,000, the satellite should take two years to build. It is expected to be launched early in 1981 into a polar orbit at a height of 900 km. As all of AMSAT's previous eight amateur satellites have been launched by NASA, it is likely that NASA will be approached to launch this one too. The one exception, however, is the German-built AMSAT satellite which is due for launch by Ariane.

Swiss nuclear safety referendum result: Strict nuclear reactor controls (*Nature* 15 February, page 508) were rejected by the Swiss electorate on 18 February by a vote of 265,271 to 919,217. Nine cantons voted for the referendum and 13 against it. The 49% vote in favour is considered to be a surprisingly good result for the nuclear opposition since the nuclear industry spent 20 million francs on its campaign. So says André Froidevaux, of the National Coordinating Committee of Swiss Anti-Nuclear Organisations: "the nuclear lobby successfully exploited working class fears that jobs would be lost if the referendum passed".

An alternative law has been put through parliament. But the anti-nuclear movement has gathered 50,000 signatures to force another national vote on this law on 20 May. The new law gives parliament the right to veto new power stations and requires the need for a station to be documented. There is also a provision giving parliament the right to expropriate land for nuclear waste disposal. This law will be opposed by the National Coordinating Committee on the grounds that it offers virtually no effective controls to reactor development.

Cambridge designers plan low energy homes: A new design of terrace houses that will cut heating costs by 75% from £120/yr to £30/yr has been proposed by the Cambridge based firm, Ambient Energy Design. Their plan, which received first prize at the Energy Show now underway in Birmingham, makes use of better cavity insulation, double glazing units with infrared reflecting film between the panes, roll shades for night time insulation, and a conservatory which will trap solar heat. Gerald Foley of the International Institute for Environment and Development calls the savings "impressive". According to Foley, 30% of primary energy in the UK goes to housing of which two-thirds is for space heating. Thus a cut in heating requirements of 75% means a savings of 15% in the overall energy budget. Members of AED are convinced that low energy consumption represented by the above measures is "economic and realistic and will become commonplace."

Ambient Energy Design—House Heating for the 1980s. 6 Aphorpe Street, Cambridge CB1 5EY, £1.50.

Third World think tank proposed: S. S. Ramphal, Commonwealth Secretary-General has proposed to the South-North Symposium held in Tanzania last December that a Geneva-based research organisation be created to back up a Third World secretariat that can be competitive with existing organisational alliances of the developed world. In 1977 there were over 2,000 meeting days for UNCTAD alone and only 56 of 117 members of the Group of 77 developing countries had missions there. In comparison, organisations like OECD, EEC, and NATO exist to provide cohesion amongst the developed countries. Ramphal proposes that an OECDC, Organisation for Economic Cooperation among Developing Countries, be formed. The OECDC will "of necessity, be technocratic and multinational". Technological improvements in data storage, retrieval and information processing are necessary for the South to negotiate successfully with the North.

