

news in brief

UK government scientists to strike: The Institution of Professional Civil Servants is continuing its industrial action through a series of selective strikes. Now scheduled for action are the government laboratories of the Agricultural Research Council and the Science Research Council. Also included will be the Central Veterinary laboratory at Weybridge, the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough and forensic scientists in the Home Office. The union is demanding pay rises linked to administrative grades for this year and an appropriate linking to outside salary structures for next year. (See leader comment.)

US-Europe to collaborate on testing cloning risks: The first results of a European attempt to assess some of the proposed hazards of the techniques of recombinant DNA (see p 811) help to define the way in which the next step in risk assessment should be carried out. It is a step, however, which cannot be carried out in Europe — because of the lack of animal facilities that meet the level of safety that is now required to avoid the conjectured risks that the experiment would attempt to assess. To escape from that predicament the European team will go to the US to collaborate with Dr W Rowe and his colleagues who have been carrying out a parallel study using the animal facilities at Fort Detrick. Both groups are testing whether the cloned genome of a tumour virus retains the ability to be infectious and to cause tumours. The Americans have already carried out some animal tests and will now be repeating them with the virus cloned in Europe.

SIPRI criticises increased NATO military spending: The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in its annual report, is sharply critical of NATO countries decision to increase their military spending by 3% a year. The SIPRI report states that the increased expenditure has been based on "dubious" propositions about USSR spending produced by US intelligence agencies. US intelligence has estimated that Soviet spending exceeds US spending, that it is taking an increased share of Soviet GNP and that it has been rising by 3% a year in real terms for a long time. According to SIPRI these estimates are constructed by converting labour intensive Soviet manufacturing into US capital intensive costs thus leading to an overestimate of real spending. "Valuing the military output of a much more labour intensive country such as the USSR at US prices distorts the actual situation" the report says. SIPRI also criticises the USSR policy of concealing defence spending, which it says contributes to the construction of exaggerated estimates of its spending.

The SIPRI report also warns that improvements in missile accuracy are leading to new nuclear war strategies. The old 1950s policy of mutual deterrence is giving way to a "counter-force" strategy. A new generation of missiles will be able to strike within tens of metres of hardened missile sites thus giving governments the "misplaced confidence that they can actually fight and win nuclear wars rather than simply deter them". (World Armament and Disarmament. SIPRI Yearbook 1979. Taylor and Francis Ltd, London.)

Sussex students win reinstatement: Sussex students Richard Flint and Shaun Fensom (21 June) were reinstated last Monday by a specially convened disciplinary committee. They had been "excluded" from campus for participating in a student union mandated examination disruption. The students were warned they would be excluded if they participated in further examination disruptions. Students have called off plans to disrupt conferences at the university this summer and the outstanding issues will be joined again in the Autumn. First year science students will decide at a mass meeting whether to continue the boycott of the preliminary science examination and the student rent strikers await the outcome of a university Senate meeting on student debt. The disciplinary committee decision followed another week of militant student action.

US prepares for military intervention in oil crisis: The US government announced Friday that it has established a "unilateral corps" of 110,000 men from Army, Navy, Marine and Tactical Air Force units. The corps will operate outside of NATO control and are ready for combat "in all theatres of operations where US interests are threatened". The special force will be dispersed among conventional military bases but will be mobilisable for rapid intervention at "hot points". Department of Defense head, Harold Brown said that the DOD currently is improving its sea and air transport facilities "so that we can get special units to various places distant from the US and Europe rapidly". Speaking at a press conference attended by Chief of Staff B. W. Rogers, Presidential adviser Z. Brzezinski, and Secretary of State C. Vance, Brown acknowledged that US dependence on oil imports was a serious potential "security" problem. The US gets 25% of its oil from the middle east. Brown emphasised that the US was seeking political solutions in the middle east and was consulting with moderate Arab states "which are understandably concerned about the possibility of outside intervention".

Strict new rules on the transport of nuclear waste: The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission recently published a strict set of rules covering the conditions under which spent nuclear fuel can be transported by road. These include the requirement that the NRC inspect and approve the route that each shipment is expected to take, that law enforcement agencies be informed in advance, and that each shipment be accompanied by guards knowledgeable about both the route, the cargo and emergency procedures.

The new rules have a dual purpose: to protect the public against possible accidents (all routes must, wherever possible, avoid major cities and urban areas), and to guard against the dangers of hijacking. To cover the latter, for example, the rules require that all vehicles be equipped with features that "permit immobilisation"; among proposals previously discussed for achieving this are dashboard buttons that would simultaneously blow out all the truck tires, explode the engine, and set off a wailing siren.

Antinuclear groups have already attacked the adequacy of the new regulations, which although they go into effect immediately, will be open for public comment for 45 days. They have challenged the first route that the NRC is now studying for approval between Norfolk, Virginia, and the Department of Energy's reprocessing and storage plant at Savannah River in South Carolina. This route would be used to transport spent fuels being brought in from abroad; anti-nuclear groups such as the Potomac Alliance argue that incoming ships could dock closer to Savannah River, and are therefore questioning the proposed route through Norfolk.

Bellerive Group attacks pro-nuclear lobby: The Bellerive Group, an international body of experts which includes Victor Weisskopf, a former director of CERN, has issued a stinging critique of conventional arguments in favour of nuclear power. Proponents of the orthodox pro-nuclear case have refused to answer the severe criticisms of their basic assumptions, the report says. These include assumptions about future electricity demand, patterns of energy use, and the possibility of expensive energy savings measures. Other criticisms are the inapplicability of nuclear generated electricity for transportation needs and the wastefulness of using nuclear generated electricity for space heating. The report also raises the dangers of nuclear proliferation and the possible dangers to civil liberties. The report warns that disaffection with society because of the nuclear issue "is greater than the nuclear industry and some governments that support it now realise. No free society can be governed without both trust and consent. Once trust evaporates government can be carried on only by increasing coercion".