

news in brief

UK government scientists step up strikes: British scientists are calling a further series of half-day strikes and demonstrations in support of their pay claim of 36%-47%. The government has offered increases ranging between 15% and 24%. The Institution of Professional Civil Servants is calling out its 20,000 scientists, 40,000 technicians and 10,000 related staff in a series of Tuesday and Thursday actions that will last until 7 August. Government establishments at Southampton, Leeds, Bath, Reading, Newcastle, Birmingham, Bedford, Cardiff and Glasgow will be involved successively. "This campaign will stop everything in these localities", said an IPCS official. The half-day actions add to the small number of volunteer indefinite strikers who are seriously affecting the country's communications and power supplies. In addition, IPCS has announced withdrawal of "good will" from operations at the Ministry of Defence, Departments of Environment and Industry and the Atomic Energy Authority. Support for further action is strong among union members.

King's College principal says UK universities should be cut: Sir Richard Way, principal of Kings College, London University has called for a reconsideration of the number of universities in the UK. Speaking at the opening of the 150th anniversary exhibition of King's College, Sir Richard gave his support to government economies. "Your government has been elected to try to establish some control over public expenditure and this is an aim which I very strongly support. I don't personally believe that the university system as a whole is necessarily short of money." Sir Richard told *Nature* that university expansion in the last 15 years did not mean that the expansion should be defended. "Just because you have 45 universities doesn't mean that you need 45 universities" he said. "I am an advocate of pruning." But such a measure need not compromise the UK's research capability. "It would be desperately wrong to compromise research", he said.

Benn calls for UN energy organisation: Tony Benn, former Energy Secretary in the Labour Government, has called for the creation of a United Nations Energy Agency to help avoid "confrontational energy policies". Although OPEC has previously resisted this proposal because of their fears of price control, Benn feels that the world is slowly moving in that direction. The important thing is to bring OPEC, the West, the Communist countries (who export oil to the West) and the non-oil producing countries into an arena that can prevent confrontation, he said.

Speaking at the annual conference of the National Union of Mineworkers, Benn also called for a public debate on nuclear power development in the UK. Previous growth of nuclear power has been predicated on overall growth, he said. But with a forecast of negative UK growth and with the events of Harrisburg in mind, big nuclear plants, particularly pressurised water reactors, need full public discussion. "We need absolute satisfaction that expansion is necessary, that expansion must be nuclear and that leaks and waste disposal problems are solved before going ahead."

UK stand on whaling: The UK government will support the proposal for a moratorium on commercial whaling. Mr Alick Buchanan-Smith, Fishing Minister at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, announced this on Monday at the opening of the 31st annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission. "Resumption of whaling", he said, "should only be reconsidered if evidence of recovery of stocks and improvements in the methods of killing justifies it." He also announced government proposal for immediate discussions with the European Community calling for a Community-wide ban on sperm whale imports. This greatly disappointed environmentalists who had expected the government to announce a ban at the meeting. Czech Conroy, for Friends of the Earth, said although they welcomed the government's support for a

moratorium on commercial whaling, they found it "totally illogical and unsatisfactory" that sperm whale imports would continue to be allowed. "The proposed discussions between the government and our partners in the EEC to achieve a community-wide ban on sperm whale imports will permit thousands more whales to be killed." Friends of the Earth, he said, would continue to press the government "hard and fast" to follow up these discussions.

France opens new information centre: A new data centre, with the purpose of providing French scientists with bibliographic information produced by the world's major documentation services, was opened at Valbonne near Nice at the end of last month. The capacity of the computerised system will be 10^{10} bytes which will allow access on-line to about 10 million references.

The Centre was built in the record time of six months at the special request of Giscard d'Estaing, the French President. The authorities had been concerned about the rapid development of data banks in the US, UK and Germany, which according to Pierre Aigrain, Secretary of State for Research, could lead to French "cultural alienation". There was also concern that French research is not properly represented in foreign data banks. The official reason for the creation of the new centre, however, is economic. French scientists have been making about 60,000 inquiries to US data banks each year at a cost of 15 million FF.

— *From the staff of La Recherche*

Chinese synchrotron construction slows: China's 50 GeV/c alternate gradient proton synchrotron, originally planned for completion by 1982, will not be finished until 1985. The announcement appeared in the Beijing (Peking) People's Daily in an article by Zhao Dongwan, a vice-chair-person of the State Scientific and Technological Commission, who appears to be in charge of the administrative side of particle physics in China. He wrote that work is proceeding on schedule for the experimental centre housing the accelerator, but the target date of 1982 announced at last year's National Science Conference has been put back to 1985 because China's national economy is being adjusted. "This means a higher standard" Zhao emphasised. Zhao also stressed the need to continue the implementation of the principle of self-reliance. The basic approach he wrote would be to send people abroad to study advanced accelerator technology while designing and building the equipment at home. China should not import equipment that she herself could produce.

In the meantime the Sino-American Joint Committee on High Energy Physics held its first meeting in Beijing on 11-12 June. This joint committee is the first of a kind which came into being after the signing of the Scientific and Technological Agreements between China and the US earlier this year. The two-day meeting was jointly chaired by Professor Zhang Wenyu, director of the High Energy Institute under Academia Sinica and by Dr J.E. Leiss, associate director of the Office of Energy Research in Washington.

— *From T.B. Tang*

Education in Chile in decline: The long term educational policy of the Chilean junta aims to eliminate entirely universal education. In a statement made in March, President Pinochet stated that the government intends to reduce educational opportunities to ensure that no more than a handful of children, whose parents can afford it, go to secondary school. In 1978, less than 70% of all children received an education compared to 92% under the Allende government. The education budget has been reduced from 17% of the total to 13.5%. In addition, the administration of many schools has been given over to business consortia who hire the teachers and plan the curriculum. The consortia receive tax benefits for providing "resources for educational purposes". Operation of all schools from primary to university level is under the final authority of the Commando de Institutos Militares.