

# NEWS IN BRIEF

## French data systems sabotaged

PROGRAMMED tapes were stolen and fires were set at computer installations in Toulouse by two anti-computer groups last week. The urban guerilla group Direct Action claimed it had removed material "destined for use by the secret services" from the Toulouse offices of Philips Data Systems which it would later release. The second attack, a fire set at the rival computer company, CII-Honeywell-Bull, was claimed in a letter to *Liberation* by a group of "computer technicians well placed to appreciate the dangers to society," calling themselves the Committee to Liquidate or Neutralise Computers. The attacks followed a French government announcement of its plans to issue tenders for extra facilities to expand telematic memory banks for industrial, official and public use.

## Jailed South African physicist in court

DR Renfrew Christie, the Oxford-trained nuclear physicist made his first court appearance last week to hear charges that he gave information about South Africa's nuclear programme to banned organisations. Christie, aged 30, has been jailed and held incommunicado without access to lawyers or friends under Section 16 of South Africa's Terrorism Act since his arrest shortly after he returned to take a job at the University of Cape Town last January. He is accused of intending to pass information about the location of South Africa's secret nuclear test sites, and a plan of the layout of the nuclear power station at Koeberg, to the African National Congress and the South African Christian Institute, two banned opposition groups. The trial will continue this week.

## AGR plans approved

IN a reversal of her previous decision, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has been persuaded to approve plans for the construction of two British made advanced gas cooled reactors as part of the UK's £10 billion nuclear energy programme.

The Central Policy Review Staff and the Department of Industry argued strongly that the British nuclear industry could not develop competitively if the Prime Minister's preference for the American-built pressurised water reactor excluded the AGR. At stake are 3,000 AGR-dependent jobs in boilermaking, pipe and valve manufacturing, and engineering. Capital costs for the two proposed plants, at Heysham in Northwest England, and Torness in Scotland, have risen by 40% to \$2.8 billion in the past year, partly as a

result of increased public demands for safety. The current reactor design has several new safety features, including an enlarged reactor diameter for easier inspection and repair, and extra fuel channels to permit the reactor to maintain full power while operating at less corrosive lower temperatures. The plans also include a spherical concrete containment vessel instead of the cylindrical one.

## Fewer Britons die at work

FEWER people were killed in accidents at work in the UK in 1978, according to the Health and Safety Executive Report\* for 1978/79. The reduction in deaths — 498, compared with 648 in 1974 — is attributed to a greater concern about hazards at work and better prevention resulting from the 1974 Health and Safety at Work Act.

But fatalities among coal mining and railway workers show a disturbing upward trend. Mine deaths increased from 40 in 1977 to 63 in 1978; those on the railways stood at 48 for 1978, 14 higher than the average figures for recent years.

Approximately 20% of the HSE's total expenditure of £49 million was spent on research, testing and scientific support services for the year in question says the report. Extramural funding accounted for £2.6 million, of which two thirds were devoted to safety in the nuclear industry and to occupational health. Extensive research into the safety of pressurised water reactors and the hazards of exposure to plutonium were studied, safety procedures for genetic engineering were developed and the possible toxic or carcinogenic effects of a number of substances encountered in the workplace were investigated.

\**Health and Safety Commission Report 1978/79. Available from HMSO £1.75.*

## UMIST moves into biotechnology

THE University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), in a move to become involved in biotechnology, has appointed its first Professor of Applied Molecular Biology. Dr Paul Broda, whose expertise is in the field of bacterial plasmids, will take up the post in the revamped Biochemistry Department of UMIST this September.

UMIST plans to back up the appointment of Dr Broda with a number of other new posts so as to assemble a team that will carry out fundamental research in areas of molecular biology that have potential industrial applications. One particular area of interest will be in antibiotic production from the streptomycetes. Another will be in the use of bacteria to derive end products of commercial value from lignin, a major waste product of the pulp industry.

## Report says 55,000 UK smokers die each year

ON World Health Day last week a report issued under the auspices of the World Health Organisation warned of the risks of smoking, and singled out the UK as the worst sufferer. Some 55,000 there die prematurely each year as a result of smoking, says the report, compared with an over 18 annual death rate from all causes of 650,000. Some 41% of adult Britons are regular smokers; one in ten of these will die prematurely of causes directly attributable to smoking and one in four from diseases in which smoking is a major factor.

A study published last week by *Mintel*, a market research magazine, showed that while the number of cigarettes smoked in Britain fell slightly, from 125.9 billion, to 125.7 billion, from 1977 to 1978, the weight of cigarette tobacco smoked rose 10% from 197 million lb to 218 million lb. *Mintel* attributes this to the increasing proportion of sales taken by king-sized brands (10% in 1975, 50% in 1978 and a projected 70% in 1981). This rise in turn is attributed to the adoption in 1978 of EEC-wide tax rules, which favour larger cigarettes.

## Academy recommends cut in formaldehyde exposure

CONSUMER exposure to formaldehyde gas, in particular that resulting from the use of urea formaldehyde (UF) foam for house insulation, should be reduced to the "lowest practical concentration" to avoid its irritant effects, according to a panel of the National Academy of Science.

In a report prepared for the US Consumer Protection Commission, the Academy's Committee on Toxicology refers to two European studies, one carried out in West Germany and the other in Denmark, as evidence that "there is no population threshold for the irritant effects of formaldehyde in humans."

The CPSC says that it has received more than 600 complaints from consumers living in homes insulated with UF foam. Reported symptoms range from eye and skin irritation to breathing difficulties, persistent nosebleeds, and nausea.

The Commission adds that the Academy report will help it to develop regulatory standards for consumer products containing formaldehyde. Both the commission and the formaldehyde industry are particularly concerned about the results of recent tests on laboratory rats carried out by the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology, which, although not yet completed, already show that 20 per cent of rats exposed to formaldehyde have developed an unusual form of nasal cancer.