Briefing:

Researcher Sues MIT In Tenure Dispute

David F. Noble, a historian who has gained widespread attention for two books analyzing the processes of technical change, has sued the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for denying him tenure. Noble, who is now a tenured associate professor of history at Drexel University in Philadelphia, claims that he was turned down for tenure at MIT because he had sharply criticized the university's links with industry. He has charged MIT with infringing his freedom of speech.

Tenure disputes are part of the fabric of academic life, and they are often painful for all concerned. Rarely do they result in a public brawl, as the Noble case promises to be, however.

Noble fired the opening shot on 9 September with a press conference announcing the suit. He also released a statement by 17 academics who said they were "deeply concerned" about MIT's decision. "We are well aware that tenure decisions are often difficult and that universities sometimes face financial constraints, but we cannot see the relevance of such factors in this instance; MIT is financially strong and Noble's case appears clear-cut according to acceptable criteria of scholarly merit. His work is widely known and respected," the statement said. The signatories—many, but not all, of whom are in sympathy with Noble's political views—include a past president and the president-elect of the Organization of American Historians and a former president of the Society for the History of Technology.

MIT officials have so far declined to comment. Calls to the offices of MIT president Paul Gray and provost John Deutch were referred to a spokesman who read a statement that said, in full, "MIT is confident that the decision of Mr. Noble's peers to deny him tenure was proper and will be upheld in a court of law."

Noble was clearly a thorn in the flesh of the MIT administration. He repeatedly criticized MIT's industrial ties and was one of the most vigorous opponents on campus of the establishment of the Whitehead Institute. His latest book, which he submitted in support of his application for tenure, challenged the role of MIT in the development of numerically controlled machine tool technology, crediting an individual entrepreneur rather than MIT faculty members with key discoveries. Noble points out in his lawsuit, however, that his political activities should not have influenced the tenure decision.

Noble was up for tenure in 1984. He had been on the faculty of MIT since 1978, in the Science, Technology, and Society (STS) program, and for 2 years before that he was a postdoctoral fellow at the university. He has written two books, *America by Design* (1977) and *Forces of Production* (1984), which were widely reviewed and generally praised for their scholarship, although not every reviewer shared Noble's conclusion that technological change in industry is driven in large part by the desire to control labor. He therefore came into the tenure process with a substantial academic reputation.

The first step in tenure decisions in the STS program is the appointment of an interdepartmental committee to review the candidate's academic record. In Noble's case, the committee consisted of four people and was chaired by aeronautical engineer Leon Trilling. According to Noble, the committee unanimously recommended him for tenure. Trilling says the committee did make a positive recommendation, although it had "some reservations." He declined to elaborate in view of Noble's lawsuit. Another member of the committee says the reservations were minor, however, and he noted that virtually every tenure committee raises some critical points.

David Noble. *Claims his criticism of MIT's industrial links improperly influenced tenure decision.*

Noble's case then came before the tenured faculty of the STS program. A positive decision would have sent the nomination to the school council and eventually to the executive committee of the MIT corporation. However, in a secret vote in February 1984, the STS faculty declined to send Noble's name forward. STS program director Carl Kaysen informed Noble of the decision and terminated his appointment at MIT. (Kaysen declined comment; his office referred calls to the provost's office, which referred them to the MIT spokesman.)

MIT has no formal appeals process in tenure cases. Noble therefore says he asked then provost Francis Low and president Gray to review his case. He contends that both affirmed the decision after a "cursory review," and thus he had no recourse but to file suit. He is asking the court to order MIT to appoint him to a tenured position or, alternatively, to reconsider his candidacy according to proper academic criteria. He is also seeking $1.5 million in damages. ■

COLIN NORMAN

Finance Ministers Curb European Research Plans

Budget ministers of the 12 member states of the European Economic Community have turned down a request from the EEC Commission in Brussels for a substantial increase next year in the funds allocated to European-wide research and development projects, ranging from fusion research to the information technology program ESPRIT.

Meeting in Brussels in early September, the ministers agreed to propose joint R&D spending of $745 million in 1987 in a budget that was subsequently presented to the European Parliament for approval. Although this represents a rise of 15% from the 1986 figure, it contrasts with the increase of more than 30% requested by the commission. Proposed growth of 70% in longer term spending commitments was cut back to 33%.

Members of the European Parliament have already attacked the budget ministers' decision, pointing out that no cuts were made in the $24 billion requested for farm-price support, which consumes almost two-thirds of the commission's spending. The parliament is expected to try to put some of the proposed research funding back, but its powers to do so are limited.

Continued pressure for financial constraint from the three largest contributors to the commission's budget—Great Britain, France, and West Germany—make it increasingly unlikely that the commission will be able to secure the major boost in research spending that it had been hoping for in its 5-year "framework program," covering the period 1987 through 1991 (*Science*, 25 April, p. 447).

Initial proposals for a set of programs, costing an estimated $10 billion over this period and placing particular emphasis on research into industrially related technologies, have already been cut back to $7.7 billion. ■ DAVID DICKSON