A Bleak Portrait of Soviet Science

Paris

Gurii I. Marchuk, the president of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, has told the Soviet Union's political leaders that the country's "real potential" for fundamental research "is approximately five times lower than that of the United States." The Soviet Union has less than one half the number of U.S. basic scientists, and an absence of research equipment means that the capital-labor ratio of scientific workers is "at least three times higher" in the United States than in the Soviet Union, Marchuk said in a speech to the Communist Party Conference in Moscow at the end of last month.

A shortage of funds for new research equipment, he said, was one of the reasons that current steps to restructure the organization of Soviet science—and in particular to encourage greater competition between research teams—were meeting with resistance. "Things are very difficult for us," admitted Marchuk, adding that in the Academy, as in Soviet society more generally, "restructuring has not yet reached the lowest organizational levels."

Marchuk's remarks followed an address in which Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had criticized the fact that "the social status of science and the prestige of scientific work have clearly declined in recent years." Gorbachev described as "abnormal" a situation in which only 6.5% of the funds allocated to scientific research go to the academic institutions which carry out most of the country's basic research.

Marchuk said that he found Gorbachev's analysis "absolutely correct." He added that the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers was currently examining proposals to substantially increase the funds devoted to basic research over the next 2 years, acknowledging that, even though the Soviet Union had some world-class scientific schools, the gap with the scientific efforts of Western nations was widening.

"The fall in our proportional contribution to world science cannot fail to be alarming," said Marchuk. "The desire not to be isolated from world science is a no less important aim than holding on to the lead in a particular area."

Closing the gap means both restructuring the Academy's scientific activities and providing new funds for research. While more open processes have been adopted for appointing laboratory directors and the heads of research teams, "laboratories have not received any more modern instruments, scarce reagents, or computer equipment, nor have their premises been expanded, and there have been no noticeable improvements in the social sphere," he said.

"This gives rise to a certain distrust of the processes that are taking place," Marchuk added. The "way out" was through raising the independence and responsibilities of laboratories, both by giving them the right to control their own financial and material resources, and "sharply increasing research materials and technical supplies," a statement that was reported to have been greeted with applause by the conference delegates.

Many of the tensions currently existing in the Soviet scientific community over the lack of funds for instruments and equipment had emerged a few days earlier at a special meeting of the presidium of the Academy held in Leningrad.

According to a report broadcast by Moscow's "World Service," many Leningrad scientists who attended the meeting complained that the Academy's "bureaucratic restrictions" were seriously holding back their research. In particular, they complained that these restrictions prevented research workers from earning foreign currency and from spending the money obtained in this way on improving their scientific facilities.

TASS from Sovfoto

Gurii Marchuk: *Academy president says "the fall in our proportional contribution to world science cannot fail to be alarming."*

In his speech to the Communist Party Conference, Marchuk admitted that "the range of problems linked with the scientific backup for restructuring is very wide," and went on to suggest that a special plenary session of the Central Committee should be held specifically to address how these various problems should be tackled.

■ DAVID DICKSON

Becker to Retain NIH Research Post

After several months of twisting in the wind, a senior scientist at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has had his fate decided. Edwin Becker will be allowed to continue his scientific career at NIH. Becker was ousted from his administrative post as head of research services in April amid charges of waste and mismanagement.

The decision to allow Becker to stay at NIH was made last week by Robert Windom, the assistant secretary of health at NIH's parent agency, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Windom was brought in to settle a bitter dispute between NIH director James Wyngaarden and Richard Kusserow, the inspector general at HHS, over the fate of Becker.

Kusserow contends that, as head of the purchasing system at NIH, Becker was responsible for overpayments on laboratory supplies amounting to more than $100 million, a figure that is vigorously contested by both Becker and Wyngaarden (*Science*, 8 July, p. 153). As punishment for his alleged sins, Kusserow wanted Becker banished from NIH forever.

But Windom decided to let Becker keep his job as chief of the nuclear magnetic resonance section at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

This is a victory of sorts for Wyngaarden, who was forced to remove Becker from his administrative job, but felt that Becker should be allowed to continue his research at NIH. Wyngaarden was concerned that yanking Becker's scientific duties would send an extremely unsavory message to young investigators considering a life in the federal bureaucracy.

With Becker back in the lab, does this mean the turf battle between Wyngaarden and Kusserow is over? Hardly. According to John Ferris of the inspector general's office, Kusserow's staff is still intent on playing an active role in the restructuring of the procurement system at NIH, as well as pursuing its investigation into the adequacy of NIH's safety precautions concerning the AIDS virus.

■ WILLIAM BOOTH