

FRANCE

Street Protests Keep The Pressure on Allègre

PARIS—"Allègre, resign! Allègre, resign!" Singing and chanting, a contingent of scientists and technicians took to the streets here last week to protest French research minister Claude Allègre's latest attempts to reform the nation's scientific establishment. The 25 January demonstration, estimated by *Science* at roughly 1000 participants, was organized by five researchers' unions that oppose a number of recent actions by Allègre, including his new push to shake up the CNRS basic research agency and his decision to abandon the SOLEIL synchrotron project in favor of a joint Anglo-French effort to build a synchrotron facility in the United Kingdom (*Science*, 6 August 1999, p. 819).

The march began at the University of Paris's Jussieu campus and snaked its way through some of the City of Light's most charming neighborhoods, ending in front of a line of police protecting the research and education ministry on the rue de Grenelle. A delegation of eight union leaders was allowed into the ministry to meet with members of Allègre's Cabinet, although both union and ministry sources told *Science* that the meeting did not result in either side changing its position. Nevertheless, the demonstration was one of the biggest anti-Allègre actions in recent years. "This march was a big success," says chemist Jacques Fossey, general secretary of the National Union of Scientific Researchers.

Fossey and others oppose much of Allègre's new reform plan, which is intended to boost opportunities for young researchers and to make it easier for scientists to move between public research agencies such as the CNRS, the universities, and industry. This is not the first time Allègre has angered French scientists by challenging the status quo. His first major attempt to overhaul French science met stiff resistance a year ago, forcing Allègre to retreat and seek a second opinion. He asked Prime Minister Lionel Jospin to appoint two parliamentary deputies to make their own reform proposals, which ended up echoing many of Allègre's ideas (*Science*, 30 July 1999, p. 647). Emboldened, Allègre last November directed CNRS president Edouard Brézin and the agency's director-general, Catherine

Bréchnag, to come up with some new proposals. But Allègre has now dropped some of his most controversial ideas, such as a significant restructuring of the agency, which many researchers feared would have given more power to the ministry and weakened the CNRS's autonomy in recruiting and evaluating scientists.

Although Paris's *Le Monde* newspaper has dubbed the new proposals "reform light," many key elements of Allègre's original program remain. For example, in a 5 November 1999 letter to Bréchnag, Allègre expressed his desire that researchers' willingness to transfer from CNRS labs to the universities or industry should "become an essential criterion in promotions" to higher paid positions. Bréchnag, who was unavailable for comment, is expected to come up with recommendations for enacting this and other reform proposals by March.

Now that Allègre has dumped some of the harsher prescriptions for change, many complaints about the reform measures tend to focus on the minister's alleged authoritarian style. Like many other Allègre critics,

Fossey accuses the minister of using autocratic methods in pursuit of reform and not sufficiently consulting with the scientific community. As for the SOLEIL decision, Fossey says, "this is the biggest piece of stupidity Allègre has ever carried out." But key officials involved in the reform effort counter these complaints. Brézin told *Science* that despite researchers' "concerns about the intentions of [Allègre] toward the CNRS," the proposals "should not be a source of fear." And geophysicist Vincent Courtillot, the ministry's director of research, disputes accusations that Allègre's reform efforts have been heavy handed, citing meetings Courtillot has held with researchers in various cities to explain and get feedback on the unfolding reform plans.

Courtillot also dismisses the importance of last week's demonstration. The protest, he says, "did not represent a significant proportion of the researcher population." Fossey concedes that the researchers' unions represent a minority of French scientists. For example, only about 12% of researchers at the CNRS and INSERM, France's biomedical research agency, are union members. But he insists that the unions' influence "is much greater than the numbers," adding, "the battle continues."

—MICHAEL BALTER



In the streets. A thousand researchers protested Allègre's reforms on 25 January.

ScienceScope

Shoot for the Stars Canadian astronomers will unveil an ambitious plan later this month for keeping their country at the forefront of exploration. But observers predict they face an uphill battle convincing politicians to go along with a \$185 million boost for astronomy over the next decade, beginning in the 2001 budget. The new money would roughly double what Canada currently spends on the discipline, including its flagship 3.6-meter Canada-France-Hawaii Telescope atop Mauna Kea in Hawaii.

The highest priority, according to a blue-ribbon panel that made the recommendations, is to buy 5% stakes in the international Next Generation Space Telescope (right) and the Atacama Large Millimeter Array project in Chile, at a total cost of \$90 million. Other hoped-for initiatives include funding more research fellowships and high-performance computers to crunch data. Without such investments, Canadian astronomers will be "sidelined," says panel chair Ralph Pudritz, a professor of physics and astronomy at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario.

Gimme a (Tax) Break Bowing to congressional pressure, the Tennessee legislature has waived a \$30 million tax bill for a major federal science project. State officials had wanted the Department of Energy to pay Tennessee the hefty one-time tax for its planned \$1.4 billion Spallation Neutron Source at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, which is supposed to produce a powerful stream of neutrons that scientists can use to probe the structure of matter. But House Science Committee chair James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) attacked the tax, threatening to hold up the plum project if Tennessee number-crunchers didn't back off. Last week, Sensenbrenner declared "a victory for U.S. taxpayers" after Tennessee Governor Don Sundquist (D) signed legislation eliminating the tax. Sensenbrenner vowed, however, "to continue aggressive oversight" of the neutron source, which is expected to be up and running by 2005 but has suffered from management turmoil and delays (*Science*, 4 June 1999, p. 1594).

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