EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

JET Strike Hits Brussels

LONDON—High-temperature plasma physicists and tokamak magnet engineers are not the kind of people you normally expect to see marching the streets, waving placards. But if you'd been in Brussels on 18 May, you may have witnessed that rare sight. Two busloads of British scientists and engineers who work at the Joint European Torus (JET)—the world record-holding fusion facility located at Culham, Oxfordshire—went to the headquarters of the European Community (EC) to protest that they're the victims of discrimination. And that was just the beginning. On 12 June and 17 June they walked out of JET laboratories in a continuing series of weekly 1-day strikes.

The cause of the dispute is simple: Thanks to the byzantine way in which the JET is funded, British staff—who make up one-third of the 600-strong JET team—earn around half the amount paid to continental European colleagues working alongside them. "Any other European country that puts their people on the project wouldn't tolerate this," says Edward Daly, a JET engineer and local committee member of the scientists' union, the Institution of Professionals, Managers, and Specialists. To add insult to injury, British researchers believe that they'll also be left behind in the race for jobs after JET shuts down in 1996—indeed, it was this prospect that finally prompted the strike.

British scientists have ended up as second-class citizens in their own country because they are employed by the UK Atomic Energy Authority (AEA), which pays a typical senior JET scientist only about $36,000 a year. In contrast, non-British scientists work at JET as temporary EC employees with EC salaries averaging more than $70,000 a year, including bonuses for living away from home, for a senior scientist. And, as EC employees, the non-British scientists will be treated as favored internal candidates for EC jobs when JET closes; British staff, on the other hand, are supposed to go back to AEA, which has already shed about one-third of its staff since 1989 and is now planning to slash its fusion program by 30%. "There won't be opportunities for us," complains Richard Gill, who heads a group responsible for soft x-ray analysis of JET's plasma.

So far, British complaints are falling on deaf ears. The AEA says that it can't afford to give the British more. And the EC says it can't take them on as EC employees. "We have no posts," says Rainer Gerold, the commission official in charge of research personnel. Even if posts were available, Brussels would be reluctant to set a precedent for future projects where EC staff may work alongside scientists employed by agencies in their member states. "If we admit that mixed systems [of employment] aren't possible," says Gerold, "this is a restriction for future research enterprises where the member states and the commission want to work together."

The British scientists have been trying to break this impasse for years. A case in the European Court of Justice ended in 1987 with a hollow moral victory for the British JET staff. The ruling: There is discrimination at JET, but it's perfectly legal under EC law. The scientists then petitioned the European Parliament, which late last year asked the commission to compile a report on pay and conditions at JET. Last month's protest in Brussels followed rumors that this report wasn't going to be ready for 2 years—and although the delegation was assured that the report would be finished by September, that didn't satisfy the British researchers. "There's a lot of buckpassing," says Gill. "People have finally lost patience."

"We all support our British colleagues," says Sergio Corti, an Italian plasma physicist who heads the committee that represents the commission employees at JET. But with JET now idle while design alterations take place, strikes don't seem to be exerting much leverage. Last week, the strike organizers hoped to talk to Paolo Fasella, EC director-general for research, when he visited Culham for a meeting of JET's governing council. But after that meeting, says Jeremy Goff, a JET technician and union organizer, Fasella "had his lunch and disappeared."

–Peter Aldhous

JET

Equal work, equal pay. British researchers make their point.

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

New Plant Institute Recommended

For two decades, one blue-ribbon committee after another has taken the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to task for its failure to put more than a tiny pittance of its huge research budget—more than $1 billion annually in recent years—into peer-reviewed competitive grants. Agriculture has often been forced by Congress to go mainly by the pork-barrel route, disbursing the vast majority of its funds based on sometimes dated institutional and political considerations. Many of the projects are of use only in limited localities—take for example $200,000 to control the broom snakeweed in New Mexico or $185,000 for research on lowbush blueberries in Maine.

As a result of its parochial focus, the committee reports have charged, USDA-sponsored plant research has failed to keep pace with the major advances in molecular and cellular biology that have revolutionized the health-related sciences, among others. And now comes a special committee of the National Research Council (NRC), charged with the task of determining how best to promote plant science, with a familiar refrain.

In a sharply worded report released this week,* the committee calls for the USDA to institute a system in which most of its research grants are awarded on the basis of merit, as judged by competitive peer review. The best way to do this: by the establishment of a "National Institute of Plant Biology" under USDA aegis. "Our report," says the committee chairman, plant pathologist Robert Goodman of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the introduction "...suggests changes to enable plant studies to function in the United States at the forefront of research, as have research on microorganisms and on animals for the past four decades." A recharged and reorganized plant biology program, the report goes on, is needed not only for the production of food, fiber, and drugs but also for the development of alternative energy sources, environmental quality, manned space exploration, and improved nutrition.

So what's new? This time around, USDA appears to be, if not actually ahead of the

*"Plant Biology Research and Training for the 21st Century," National Academy Press, 1992.