

OLD WORLD

TRADE UNIONS

Enter the APST

ONE of the first bodies to apply for registration under the Industrial Relations Act at the beginning of October was the Association of Professional Scientists and Technologists, which was formed recently by the Council of Science and Technology Institutes. When the council itself was set up in 1968 by five professional scientific institutes (including the Institute of Physics and the Royal Institute of Chemistry), its principal aim was to put forward the views of its member institutes on such subjects as the training of technicians and teachers; but when it became clear in the summer of 1970 that the government's legislation on industrial relations could pose problems for professional scientists, the council set up a working party to examine the desirability of forming an independent protective association.

Although the Industrial Relations Act does cater for professional bodies to a certain extent—they can be included on a special register and thus enjoy some of the rights of trade unions, for example—many of the professional organizations find their hands tied in other ways. Activities by the science institutes in the financial interests of their members are restricted to varying extents by their charters or articles of association, and separate salary negotiations for scientists in different disciplines would anyway be unacceptable both to employers and to employees.

The association is at present run by staff from the council's member institutes and the principal permanent staff will not be appointed until early 1972 when the association hopes to have a permanent headquarters and a healthy membership. The council says that between 5,000 and 10,000 members will have to be recruited during the next month or two so that the association can make itself felt before employers become too involved with the intricacies of the Industrial Relations Act. The annual subscription for a full member will be £5.

Dr Louis Cohen, secretary of the Institute of Physics, said this week that the association would probably attract principally those scientists who work in industry; he estimates, for example, that there are 4,000 to 5,000 potential members of the association in the Institute of Physics.

The Council of Science and Technology Institutes is conscious that, especially outside the industrial sector, some groups of scientists (for example, those in the civil service) already have effective negotiating bodies and that

“there is no question of trying to usurp their position in any way”. Mr William McCall, general secretary of the Institution of Professional Civil Servants, says that competition for members between the association and the institution is unlikely and that it would anyway be self-defeating.

EUROPEAN LABORATORY

Vain Effort?

A CAMPAIGN to avert the threatened closure of the European Space Research Institute (ESRIN) is gathering momentum as a result of a conference of the Plasma Physics Division of the European Physical Society held at ESRIN in September. A united front was formed against the proposed closure under the leadership of Professor B. Lehnert of the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, chairman of the Plasma Physics Division.

The decision to close the laboratory was made at a meeting of the council of the European Space Research Organization in July. The chairman, Professor G. Puppi of Bologna, proposed a plan for ESRO which was adopted by the council and which recommended that “circumstances enforce consideration of closing down ESRIN” but “the council would welcome any alternative viable solution”. This decision is to be ratified at a further meeting of ESRO in November.

Professor Lehnert said this week that one particularly distressing feature of the affair was the lack of warning given to the scientific community of the closure. The presentation of the *fait accompli* has undermined the morale of the laboratory and, even if the laboratory can still be saved, the damage is probably irreparable. Lehnert, on behalf of the Plasma Physics Division, has this week sent a letter to ESRO protesting against the decision. He stresses that the laboratory has made several contributions to plasma physics and “during the existence of ESRIN, members of the [Plasma Physics] Division have established contacts with the staff and realize the high value of the scientific work performed at ESRIN”. The letter continues, “The ESRIN laboratory must be considered an essential and important part of activities within ESRO and not as a luxury. We consider the proposal to relinquish ESRIN a retrograde step in European space research. Any apparent saving in the budget will be nullified by a decrease in the efficiency of ESRO and by increased pressure on national research budgets.” It is very difficult to argue with this logic and an ESRO spokesman did not attempt to deny it when he said this week that ESRIN could not carry on in its present form because of financial

problems. He said, “ESRO is entering the applications field—air traffic control, meteorology and telecommunications—and some of the money now being spent on scientific programmes must go. The programmes least connected with essential ESRO activities—the ones at ESRIN and the rocket sounding programme—are being run down.”

The reason for the precipitate decision to close the laboratory has aroused speculation in the European press in recent weeks. An article in *Die Welt* on September 30 says that the decision was forced upon ESRO by a French threat that they would withdraw from ESRO if the laboratory was not closed. Professor Lehnert said that he did not know why the decision had been taken but he was certain that pressure was being exerted on ESRO from a member country. It is known that the French feel that the science budget of ESRO should be limited.

The efforts to save the laboratory within ESRIN seem doomed but the scientists hope that the laboratory can be maintained in its present form under the auspices of some other European or Italian organization. An ESRO spokesman said on Monday that the director general, Dr A. Hocker, is in touch with Italian organizations to find a solution. He said, “The Italian authorities accept the idea that the present ESRIN activities cannot continue permanently within ESRO and the director general is actively negotiating to see what activity could be carried out at ESRIN.”

A problem with transferring the laboratory to Italian hands is the current unrest among Italian scientists. At present there are unfilled positions in Italian national laboratories and another addition to their number will probably not be welcomed by the Italians. A more feasible possibility, if the laboratory is to be maintained in its present form, is for another European organization to take ESRIN under its wing. EURATOM seems the obvious candidate although CERN is a possibility. A difficulty that the scientists are facing in their campaign is that ESRIN is not unique in Europe. There are several national laboratories that rival ESRIN in quality of work and so the motivation for keeping the laboratory as a viable entity is not so strong as it might be.

It is still possible that ESRIN will remain within ESRO but with a different purpose. The ESRO office in Paris said on Monday that the director general is now negotiating with the Italian authorities to see what activity could be carried out at ESRIN instead of plasma physics. There is no information on what this new purpose might be but a spokesman said that it would be more closely related to the activities of ESRO than previously.