

M.R.C. CUTS

The Medical Research Council, with the second largest budget of the five government sponsored councils (£36m last year) also has a somewhat different policy in terms of the organisation of its research from the S.S.R.C. It maintains 70 long-term research units on the rather odd basis that they are usually 'guaranteed' existence until the retirement of their director and usually "die" with him. As a result of this about 2/3rds of its budget is required to fund this permanent commitment. The rest goes on providing short term funds for outside researchers, usually small groups or individuals in universities.

Its real income had already begun to decline in '73 and the transfer of 25% of its budget to commissioned research under the Rothschild scheme had already begun to have its impact on research.

The instructions to implement cuts came apparently out of the blue, and without consultation with the unions in a letter to Directors of the research establishments. In it the M.R.C. admitted in effect that these were necessary, not because the government had suddenly ordered the M.R.C. to make them, but because the Council itself had miscalculated its budget by failing to anticipate the recent rises in costs and salaries.

Over the next six months directors were told to suggest ways in which cuts of up to approximately 5% of their total budgets could be made. This amounts to a cut of the order of 25% in the non-salary expenditure of units. The most likely line for directors to take in complying with this instruction would be to cancel future projects, not to replace staff who leave and to minimise running costs. It seems unlikely that this ground will ever be made up with further cuts likely in the next few years, unless a vigorous resistance to their implementation is made. The unions have advised members not to co-operate with the cuts until negotiations have taken place. In this connection it is worth describing the precarious position in which research staff find themselves under the terms of a new procedure for selecting researchers for tenure recently negotiated by the A.U.T. Whereas most staff in M.R.C. units - clerical, technical and administrative have civil-service type appointments of unlimited duration, the contracts of research workers were until now based on the university research model with renewable 3 year contracts. While free interchange between university posts and research posts was easy and jobs in both expanding, this posed no problem - at least in the younger age group. Tenured positions were available on a selective basis, but only a small proportion of the research force actually held this kind of post.

The A.U.T. had been pressing for a change in the structure of research posts so that at a certain age or with a certain amount of experience a researcher would have to be considered for a tenured post with three quarters of those eligible being granted such posts. All this could hardly be argued against in terms of offering some security of tenure in the research field, however the package negotiated, including the procedures for selection and appeal, leave researchers in a Catch-22 situation at a time when jobs in the research field are fast disappearing.

During changeover to the new structure the council will consider all staff over the age/experience limit for a tenured post. However, since it was claimed they must have room for "flexibility" in future a third of the present staff will not be offered tenure. Not only that, but once refused a post they will not be eligible in future for a tenured post; Instant Lifetime Failure! Nor may they even be employed on part-time research contracts as before. The only course open is to be "demoted" to a technical post or to leave the M.R.C. and try to find a job elsewhere. The introduction of this new structure has been carried out without any safeguards against the predictable outcome of using a committee set up for a quite different purpose, to make decisions on a large number of researchers who were immediately eligible for tenure. The admitted result has been a selection biased in favour of those medical fields with which the members of the committee had most familiarity, and against e.g. technical fields. In the first cases the committee considered, no reason for adverse decisions were given; indeed it turned out that no reason was even recorded in the minutes, leaving the applicant in an impossible position for making an appeal against the decision. As far as the M.R.C. and A.U.T. were concerned this was an exercise (sic) for the new structure; the fact that it summarily disposed of a third of the research staff by an arbitrary and ill-conceived procedure was just unfortunate.

This seems to me to point to the urgent necessity for research workers and university staff to co-ordinate action in defence of their jobs and the continuance of the work of research and teaching. By virtue of their organisation and ethos research workers are a fragmented and competitive group - it is necessary to build co-operation and mutual support and it seems clear to me that the A.U.T. will not be in the front line in defending their members' interests.

Liz Atkins