

REPORTS: PENTAGON

Report of Pentagon meeting 4.12.81

1 Reports from groups.

See elsewhere in Newsletter

2 Use of the 'Radical Statistics' name.

The Pentagon reviewed the procedures for using the name 'Radical Statistics' in publications and statements. No change from the present arrangement was suggested: i.e. there should be a meeting open to all RS members, and/or an open circulation of a draft, prior to use of the RS name. In cases where insufficient time is available for this to be done, at least two Pentagon members should be consulted.

3 Rayner Report.

It was reported that a document concerning the Rayner Report has been produced by a sub-committee of the RSS and was submitted to their July council meeting. Council decided not to act further on the document. The president prof. D. Cox instead wrote the letter to the PM which was printed in the RSS 'News and Notes'. It was arranged that an article on the proposed cuts in government statistics be written for the Newsletter.

4 Annual Meeting

It appeared that insufficient numbers of active RS members existed in Birmingham to allow the AGM to be organised there. RS members in Sheffield agreed to organise the meeting in Sheffield. Further details are printed elsewhere in this newsletter.

5 Newsletter Production

The production and sending out of the RS Newsletter has in recent years been organised by John Bibby. John is not going to be in a position to do this for more than the next couple of newsletters and so an alternative arrangement must be made. It may be that the functions of maintaining the address list and printing address labels will have to be separated from that of printing the Newsletter. The Pentagon is investigating possibilities, but would like to hear from any RS member with access to software/hardware suitable for either of the above functions.

HEALTH GROUP

We have now had 2000 copies of the second edition of 'The unofficial guide to official health statistics' printed. Apart from a few minor amendments and corrections, it differs from the first edition to the extent of having an additional 'foreword' and a new 'conclusions'. In these we point out that it isn't too clear at present which of Rayner's cuts are actually going to be implemented and criticise him for replacing inadequate data by no data instead of better data, as well as for wanting to curtail publication of data. We also mention the Steering Group on Health Services Information (often referred to as the Horner Committee) and actually go as far as saying it has some good ideas while wondering if the NHS has resources to put them into action. There is some good news, though. The prices are the same as for the first edition.

The guide 'demystifying' methods often used in occupational cohort studies, which was the subject of David Jones' letter in the last newsletter, is now circulating in draft form. A meeting to discuss the draft will be held in London School of Hygiene bar on February 23 after the RSS Medical Section meeting. Please send comments to David Jones before that date if you can't come.

Derek Cook is preparing the first draft of a paper about our work on drug trials. Tony Fletcher will be bringing us up to date with developments on the 'Labour movement epidemiology' scene at the AGM. He has been working for a few months in a setting where he was hoping to test out some of the ideas which had been discussed at meetings on the subject.

ALISON MACFARLANE

NUCLEAR GROUP

The Nuclear Numbers game is the title of the pamphlet produced by the year-old Radical Statistics Nuclear Disarmament Group.

The pamphlet - almost a small book really, with around 90 pages and a spine - is subtitled 'understanding the statistics behind the bomb' and should be on sale by the time this newsletter appears. As I write, some final details of price have to be decided.

I have found working with this group an enriching experience. It was set up through a note in the Newsletter, plus personal contacts. From the outset we had in mind a published output, although it was evident that we had learning and demystification to accomplish for ourselves. It seems that often the best way to achieve this is through aiming at a particular objective in the group's relation to the 'outside world', to that political movement or the academic scene. (In some ways I was the slowest of the group to unlearn some preconceived ideas: my original view of the pamphlet was as a collection of many useful statistics with minimal commentary and little sustained argument, and it took a long time to catch up with the others here.)

The membership of the group fluctuated over a number of preparatory meetings (being held once every few weeks, in an evening, at Poland Street). But once we'd got beyond accumulating notes to the stage of preparing drafts, it settled down at a stable six. And we soon began to arrange daytime meetings, at weekends, whose frequency increased as we neared a coherent piece of work. At the end of the summer a first draft was circulated to various specialists and activists around nuclear and military issues, and with the help of their comments - providing timely encouragement as to the work of the pamphlet - a second draft was ready in December. We fell down a bit in editing for style, and at the proof-reading stage some dire and obscure passages required attention. This was due to our concern with the adequacy of the general arguments and specific illustrations, plus general overcommitments.

I've concentrated on the production process here, because it seems to me that Radtats could have more groups, making more statistical interventions, but to briefly summarise the contents: there are four sections, flanked by an introduction and appendix. The introduction sets out our rationale: while our opposition to nuclear weapons may be political/moral, the case for them is often made through statistics. Section 1 takes up the most familiar and critical area of such debate: the 'balance of terror', arguments for the strategic superiority of Warsaw Pact forces in the European theatre. It runs through the statistical issues clearly and concisely, and brings out the conceptual displacements that take place - from expenditure to threat, from stockpiles to superiority. Crucially, these displacements rely for their viability on a complex of assumptions about conflict and conflict scenarios.

The second section deals with the wider context of the arms race: nuclear proliferation, the arms tank, NATO and Britain's particular role in the system. The aim is again to provide and demystify data relevant to the main arguments here (is the world more secure through nuclear weapons? is Britain a typical NATO member? does the arms trade benefit us all?) The third section focuses on nuclear war impacts. It takes issue with the official estimates of likely casualties and provides a 'tool kit' for developing local scenarios. Despite its gruesome nature, the material presented is both accessible and original. The fourth section draws out the common strands to the arguments developed in the text, and considers how statistics can be brought to bear on issues of disarmament, conversion and alternative defence strategies. The appendix outlines different sources of statistics, their advantages and limitations. There is also a glossary of abbreviations.

We have been so busy preparing this, and will be tied up for a while promoting the pamphlet, that we haven't really thought about whether we want to continue as a group. If we do, a host of topics to work on have been thrown up - especially where issues of industrial dependence on the military and the scope for conversion are involved. (We're rather suspicious of the figures usually cited here.) Perhaps inputs from new members would be important in energising us! And meanwhile please read, talk about, and sell massive quantities of our pamphlet.

RACE GROUP

The group has two projects in hand. The first is a co-operative project with Sheffield Anti Nazi League and the Education Department, described elsewhere in this newsletter. The second is work on the second edition of Britain's Black Population.

A reprint of this book is currently in hand since sales have been going quite well. A second edition of the book is planned for mid 1983 and this means finishing the redraft by the end of 1982. A timetable for this is currently being worked out. One current idea is that chapters from the book will appear as Race Group Briefing Papers as they are updated during the year. Current work is in progress on Employment statistics. The next edition will contain new material from the 1981 Census as well as updating continuing series of statistics and there may be a chapter on crime and the police. The chapter on employment has been reproduced in the Open University reader

"Discrimination and Disadvantage in Employment: the experience of black workers". P Braham. M Pearn. E Rhodes. Harper & Row Ltd. Published February 1982

We would welcome new members into the group to help with this work.

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