

The Nuclear Numbers Game in France

The following is an account of our experience in raising the issue of nuclear war in a french conference. We hope it is of some general interest.

Following the succesful 'Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons', nuclear war is an issue widely discussed in health journals and conferences in Britain and the USA. In the field of social medecine, the discussion is particularly strong.

With characteristic linguistic insularity, we did not know whether similar discussions were continuing among health workers in France. The occasion of an anglo-french joint meeting of epidemiology and social medecine, held over easter in France, seemed an appropriate time for discussing the issue with french people working in this field. At the instigation of two Radical Statistics Nuclear Disarmament Group people, a fringe meeting on 'Nuclear War and Public Health' was set up.

The meeting was reasonably well attended, with about a dozen french and as many british present. Discussion was initiated with a description of the 'Nuclear Numbers Game' project, and an account of what had been going on in general in Brtain arround this issue. Members of the 'Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons' and 'Scientists Against Nuclear Arms' described the activity of these organisations.

In the subsequent lively discussion the following strong consensus emerged among the french present:

(a) that no similar discussion was taking place in France in the health field.

(b) that, unlike in Britain and the USA, the french movement for nuclear disarmament was strongly party political, with the pro Russian Communist Party seen as been the dominant force in the movement.

(c) that since France was not going to allow cruise missiles or any other US weapon on its soil, the issue in france was quite different.

(d) that noone in France doubted the horrific nature of nuclear war, but that there was nonetheless almost universal agreement on the need to hold on to nuclear weapons.

(e) that nuclear war, and its consequences or its prevention, was not a proper matter for scientific debate.

More positively, a french participant organised a letter to be sent to the president of the french epidemiological society, requesting a meeting on nuclear war.

It may be that the above description gives too gloomy a view. It could be that this group was not representative of all currents of opinion in the field of social medecine in France. Though it is clear that the issue of nuclear war had not previously been discussed in the context of public health in France, there certainly was considerable interest and willingness to discuss the matter.

Are other people aware of a debate going on in the health field or among other scientists in France? What is the situation in other countries?

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