

Week of March 15 to 20

S U M M A R Y

- p. 2 HEALTH : Safety for miners
The European Community has been financing a research programme aimed at preventing accidents in coal and iron ore mines since 1976. A new five-year programme has just been drawn up to extend research work in this sector.
- p. 3 WOMEN : A new committee on equal opportunities
A consultative committee on equal opportunities for men and women has just been set up to help the European Commission implement its new action programme on women..
- p. 4 ECONOMY : Is Japanese investment good for you ?
Although the EEC is currently running a record trade deficit with Japan, Brussels recently authorised a low interest loan to Sony, to allow the Japanese firm to set up a new factory in South Wales.
- p. 5 RAW MATERIALS : New test-tube commodities ?
The Ten have decided to finance a series of research projects designed to reduce European dependence on imported raw materials.
- p. 6 SOCIAL : Fighting drug addiction
A report drawn up by the European Parliament's committee on health and the environment draws attention to the dramatic increase in drug abuse in Europe. The committee recommends a wide-ranging information campaign to tackle the problem.
- p. 7 CUSTOMS : "European" customs officers on the horizon ?
A member of the European Parliament has proposed that customs officials on the Community's external frontiers should be given a special "Community" status. These "European customs officers" would be recruited in the different Member States.

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HEALTH : Safety for miners

Although mining accidents are less frequent today than they were in the last century, mining is still a dangerous profession.

Experts point out that the nature of risks and dangers facing a miner today are very different from those existing in the nineteenth century. For one thing, given the exhaustion of the mines close to the surface of the earth, miners are increasingly forced to dig deeper in their search for coal or minerals. Secondly, mining technology has also changed significantly : increased mechanisation, a reduction in the number of mines, the introduction of new support, transport and monitoring systems, etc. now characterise the profession.

This change in mining techniques has raised unprecedented security problems. Research aimed at identifying and preventing the problems facing miners - both individually and collectively - has been underway for several years now. One of the main research programmes in this sector was introduced by the European Community in December 1976. The five-year global programme covers 80 projects, and is backed by 4.1 million pounds in EEC funds. Some of the research projects have resulted in the creation of prototypes, that need a few final touches before being introduced onto the market. In several cases, research is still continuing, and covers such areas as fire-fighting in mines, noise reduction, or improvement of electric material. Some of these projects are of interest to both the coal and the steel industry.

A memorandum calling on the ten EEC states to launch a new research programme designed to extend and complete the first one, has just been drawn up by the European Commission. The programme, whose financial costs are put at 6.9 million pounds, will also cover a five-year period. As in the past, work will be confined to mining research institutes in the Community states. While the first programme was exclusively limited to underground activities, the new programme will also deal with open cast mining. The aim of the programme is, of course, to improve working conditions for European miners.

WOMEN : New Committee on equal opportunities

The last two decades have seen major changes in the position of women in the European Community. But feminists agree that it is still far too early to proclaim victory. Current economic difficulties facing the ten EEC states seriously threaten the principle of equality of treatment for men and women and could even - if appropriate preventive measures are not taken - endanger some of the legitimate rights obtained by women after years of unsung struggle.

Most working women are in a particularly precarious situation today. They face intensive competition from men, especially in the unskilled sector or when it comes to looking for part-time jobs. Social infrastructure projects geared to women's needs such as nurseries and kindergartens are often among the first to be scrapped because of budgetary restrictions. Finally, women continue to work in a limited number of professions, despite the move towards new sectors.

The economic and social evolution is not, however, completely negative. Attitudes towards the role of women continue to change, as is illustrated by the willingness to share parental and household responsibilities shown by an increasing number of young men. Moreover, the prospect of a progressive reduction of working time and its breakdown into more flexible working hours should allow both men and women to find the ideal balance between professional and family life.

The European Commission has indicated its determination to continue to work towards equal opportunities for men and women. A significant new action programme covering the period 1982 to 1985 was announced recently. It covers two areas : the first concerns the systematic reinforcement of individual legal rights, and the second relates to the changes in lifestyles and traditions. (see Eurofocus 1/82 p. 7-8).

A consultative committee on equal opportunities has also been set up to assist the European Commission in the implementation of its policies. Members of the committee number twenty - two from each member state - and are, essentially, in charge of national committees on female labour. Ten representatives of the social partners will also attend the committee meetings as observers. The new committee held its inaugural session in Brussels on March 11 and 12. The decisions to elect Baroness Betty Lockwood (United Kingdom) as President of the committee, and Mrs Marcelle Devaud (France and Mrs Helle Degn (Denmark) as the committee's vice Presidents were taken at the meeting. Best of luck to the committee ... and may its work help all European women.

ECONOMY : Is Japanese investment good for you ?

The smokey roar of machinery which once reverberated through South Wales from the pitheads in the valleys to the blast furnaces by the sea, is all but silent. Traditional dependence on the two heavy industries hardest hit by the recession has brought mass unemployment and untold misery to an area which was once the powerhouse of an industrial revolution and is now an industrial ghost-land.

But a new and controversial form of industry is coming to South Wales and its arrival exemplifies a dilemma faced by depressed areas throughout Europe. Japanese firms, eager to gain a foothold in the EEC and tempted by pools of unemployed skilled labour, are responding in large numbers to investment incentives offered by local authorities and the European Community, as regional aids.

Johanna Maij-Weggen, a Dutch Christian Democrat member of the European Parliament summed up European fears about the development when she recently questioned the wisdom of a £3.4 million low-interest loan granted to the Japanese hi-fi giant Sony, by the Community, to manufacture colour TV tubes at Bridgend, in South Wales. "Why", she asked, "is the EEC subsidising a company that is in an extremely strong financial position, is engaged in fierce competition with similar European companies and has its headquarters in a country that is causing us severe economic difficulties?"

The answer, of course, is a hundred and twenty new jobs, in addition to the nine hundred already created by Sony, in an area where seven thousand steelworkers were made redundant last year alone.

Welsh local authorities, in their struggle to contain unemployment, have welcomed direct Japanese investment with open arms, devoting immense amounts of time, money and effort to persuade companies like Nissan, who build Datsun cars, to invest in the region. They say that investment incentives like the low-interest Sony loan, which came from the European Coal and Steel Community's reconversion fund, are vital to regenerate economic growth in the area, and point out clauses in the loans which require priority recruiting among redundant coal and steel workers. They also claim that the new technologies and skills that the Japanese are bringing with them can only benefit the local economy.

But despite similar attitudes prevailing in other depressed parts of Europe, notably Ireland, doubt remain as to whether such a course is desirable, given the tense trading relations which currently exist between Japan and the EEC.

Last year Japan's trade surplus with the European Community amounted to close to 10.3 billion dollars and EEC officials showed signs of becoming increasingly disturbed by the lack of reciprocity exhibited by the Japanese in opening their markets to European products. Sceptics suggest that direct Japanese investment in Europe may simply be a way of getting around retaliatory trade barriers, if they were ever to be imposed.

RAW MATERIALS : New test-tube commodities ?

Everyone has been conscious of the need for greater independence in the field of energy for nearly 10 years now, but less attention has been devoted to the equally important need to lessen Europe's dependence on outside supplies of other raw materials.

Take wood and timber, for instance. Paper, construction and other uses have created a demand in the European Community that far surpasses internal production and has resulted in the largest single import bill outside of oil. Since most of these supplies come from other European countries and North America, the outflow of currency to those countries is a major drain on Europe's balance of payments. We are also largely dependent on other countries for supplies of most other raw materials.

What to do about this dependency is a challenge not only for industrialists and officials, but now also for scientists and researchers. Increasingly European Community governments and laboratories are turning to modern technology for the answers to problems of supply, exploration and conservation of raw materials.

Just recently the European Community's Ministers responsible for research and development affairs approved a joint programme for research into this important field for the period 1982 to 1985. Some E 30 million will be spent on projects seeking to substitute or recycle materials including metals, minerals, wood and ceramics. The funds will be aimed at finding new processes or techniques for more efficient use of these products, recycling or reprocessing them, developing substitutes or, in some cases, finding new supplies. Other parts of this programme will cover secondary raw materials and uranium. Some of these funds will be directed toward a coordination of the diverse national research projects underway or being considered in this field, so that needless duplication of effort can be avoided.

This decision was one of the major aspects of the recent meeting of Research Ministers, who also approved continuation of the Community's important research project into thermonuclear power generation for the 21st century, another outstanding example of planning ahead to head off possible problems through science and technology. The Ministers also held a discussion on the general joint strategy for the Community to follow in science and research in the coming challenging period.

SOCIAL : Fighting drug addiction

Drug consumption in the ten European Community states has increased dramatically over the last few years. Today, it appears to have taken on crisis proportions as more and more young people turn to an assorted mix of drugs, tranquilisers and hallucinogenics to escape a world of unpleasant realities.

"The drug phenomenon as we know it today constitutes a serious threat to European society", warns a report on the need to combat drug consumption drawn up recently by the European Parliament's committee on public health and the environment. Consumption of drugs is growing in particularly "vulnerable" social groups, including young people, the unemployed and immigrants, says the Parliamentary report.

Certain changes in drug consumption patterns have taken place over the last few years. The report points out, for instance, that "natural drugs" originating in Third World countries have now been replaced by synthetic narcotics that are more readily available on European markets. At the same time, abuse of heroin is increasing and an increasingly large segment of the population in EEC states is consuming sleeping pills and tranquilisers.

Consumption of alcohol - also a drug although we tend to forget this sometimes - has also grown, particularly among women and young people. Some of the figures released by the Parliamentary report illustrate the seriousness of the situation. In Belgium, almost 10% of all school children have tried drugs at least once.

In Denmark, consumption of heroin and cocaine is increasing, although the use of amphetamines seems to be falling off. A survey of drug abuse in West Germany shows that 20% of the population between 14 to 25 years uses drugs. Drug-induced deaths are increasing in France, and in Italy, the consumption of drugs increased by 80% among young people between 18 to 25 years in 1979 alone.

The situation, says the report, requires action at Community level, with emphasis on information and education campaigns designed to dissuade young people from succumbing to the temptation of using drugs.

The European Commission should also take action on two fronts, recommends the report. This would include the compilation of more detailed data on drug abuse in the EEC states, and the setting up of an EEC organisation which would coordinate drug-related research work being done in the different Member States. The organisation would also be responsible for the information and education campaigns.

CUSTOMS : European customs officers on the horizon

Customs and police officers have in common the fact that they are generally not very popular with the public. Just the sight of their uniform is often enough to arouse fear and loathing in the hearts of passers-by. But policemen at least have the advantage that no one seriously questions their existence. This is not always the case with customs officers, who are generally regarded by the public as unnecessary, now that the common market exists. A customs union exists between the European Community member states, whose stated objective is to do away with them. Major obstacles to the freedom of trade in goods and services throughout the Community have been eliminated and the formalities at internal Community borders have been simplified. The completion of the customs union is currently hanging on further progress in other areas of integration, such as taxation, transport and statistics. Ulrich Irmer, a German liberal member of the European Parliament, recently suggested that in addition to posting national customs officers at each border, officials from other EEC member states also be assigned to these posts. These officials would have Community responsibilities rather than national ones.

But the European Commission rejected the proposal on the grounds that it would be premature to enter such a phase at this stage, although they acknowledged that such a move might help ensure fairer application of Community customs regulations.

Efforts to strengthen collaboration between national customs administrations are going on and there is a special working group devoted to the subject. The Commission said that the establishment of a special Community customs corps would be a final phase in a long process. It could only be established gradually and after close consultation. Officials did not indicate whether this would be in two, three, five or ten years and all bets are still open.

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