

letters

Policy on dissidents

The actions of the Soviet Union against dissidents, most recently the imprisonments of Orlov and Scharansky, have outraged all people who believe in human liberty. It is particularly appropriate for the scientific community to make efforts to liberate their imprisoned colleagues and to prevent further attacks on the freedoms of Soviet scientists.

These efforts are made much more difficult by the official policy of the Carter administration, which opposes human rights violations in the Soviet Union but supports them in countries like Iran and Korea. This policy is not a human-rights policy but an anti-Soviet policy, driven in part by right-wing pressure aimed at destroying a SALT II agreement and increasing the US military budget.

If the efforts of American scientists are to be effective, they must be completely and clearly dissociated from official American policy. Efforts that are limited to the rights of Soviet scientists, such as those of Scientists for Orlov and Scharansky, appear to the Soviets and to others as simple extensions of the official American policy. It is interesting that some of those who now refuse cooperation with the Soviet Union are eager to increase contacts with Communist China without any inquiry into or concern about the human-rights situations there.

For many years an organization called Amnesty International has worked to help persecuted individuals in any country throughout the world. Scientists interested in human rights might well consider joining and supporting this organization rather than forming new groups limited to human-rights problems in the Soviet Union.

LINCOLN WOLFENSTEIN
Carnegie-Mellon University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

11/21/78

Journal complaint

The comparison of *JETP Letters* and *Physical Review Letters* by Mark Azbel (December, page 82) is indeed interesting. One important point not addressed in his letter is how conflicting referee reports are handled by the JETP editors. In the past, the PRL editors have shown a remarkable reluctance to make editorial

decisions in the face of conflicting referee reports. Although the editorial policy states "Calling on a third referee is now uncommon"¹ there is a substantial delay in such cases. I believe this is an area in which the PRL procedures could be improved. A possible step toward alleviating this delay might be an expansion of the board of associate editors.

A more serious problem is the delay imposed on papers not honoring the page charges in the *Physical Review*. The projected delays of nearly a year and a half for papers currently being accepted by *Physical Review* (B15) is clearly incompatible with the objective of the APS to facilitate the "advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of physics." The situation is particularly discouraging to younger physicists who do not yet have significant financial support. A possible solution might be to allow a certain (small) number of pages gratis per article (with due precautions to prevent a long article from being split up into several small ones!). In any case, I hope the physics community can find a way out of this unreasonable delay soon.

Reference

1. Bull. Am. Phys. Soc. 23, 664 (1978).

K. R. SUBBASWAMY
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky

12/8/78

COMMENTS BY PRL: The editors of *Physical Review Letters* are reluctant to make arbitrary editorial decisions on papers that receive conflicting referee reports. We do not find that reluctance remarkable. We have made some expansions in the number of associate editors (for instance, in nuclear physics) and other expansions are planned. We believe that such an increase in the number of associate editors will improve the selection of papers; we are less optimistic over the possibility that the handling of those papers that receive an unfavorable referee's report will be expedited.

Editors,
Physical Review Letters

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letters

here at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Now any absent-minded theorist may glance out his window (see photo) into the physics courtyard and



immediately refresh his memory about the complexity of SU_3 predictions. The person(s) responsible for this rediscovery have not yet been identified.

ROBERT M. MORSE

University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin

12/6/78
Photo

No boycott for South Africa

In August an International Conference (on Dynamical Properties of Heavy-Ion Reactions), supported by IUPAP as well as local sponsors, was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. Earlier, two groups of French physicists had circulated a letter calling for a boycott of this conference because of the racial policies of the South African government. The conference organizers had not been informed of this action; I happened to be the only one in South Africa who, as a member of the International Committee, received a copy of the boycott appeal. I reacted to it by a letter to the two French groups ("A Reply to French Colleagues," 26 March 1978), copies of which I sent to other members of the International Committee and invited speakers. Afterwards I learned that other boycott petitions had been circulated at institutions and scientific meetings in the United States, the Netherlands and Austria, one of which led to an unpleasant incident at the Gordon Conference on Nuclear Chemistry in June. I also understand that scientists from South Africa have been prevented, on political grounds, from attending professional meetings in certain countries. In these circumstances I wish to make the main points of my reply more widely known to the physics community, and to express my personal views in general on boycotts, isolation and discrimination against scientists who work in countries with objectionable governmental policies.

I believe that such actions do not serve the purpose for which they are intended. On the contrary, their effect will be to

frustrate or stifle the activities and influence of people who by the nature of their profession are striving to uphold and promote—in however small a degree—cultural and human values. Scientists, as well as other civilized people with this outlook and concern, are opposed to conditions and actions which disregard or endanger these values, wherever they may occur. Many see themselves (as I do) primarily as members of an international community to whose standards and ideals they try to adhere and they regard differences of race and color, national origin and (up to a point) sex, as of minor significance. They cannot support discrimination on the basis of any of these accidental characteristics, and are firmly opposed to any violation or restriction of human rights. Naturally you find such people prevalent in universities and other scientific and cultural institutions—in South Africa as well as in other countries. In my reply I referred to the declared policy in regard to academic freedom and racial segregation, of those institutions with which I am proud to be associated—the Universities of Cape Town and of the Witwatersrand (where the heavy-ion conference was held). Isolation of such institutions and their members from the international community and boycotts of their activities will cut their very lifeline.

Fortunately, most individual scientists from South Africa have so far not been made to feel that they are tarnished by the shadows of the situation and events in their country; they have been enjoying the friendly hospitality of their colleagues and host institutions abroad as much as other foreign visitors and guests. Their views and attitudes are known to their friends; other colleagues would hesitate to identify a fellow scientist with government policies in his country automatically, on the sole grounds that he lives and works there. In view of what I have said before, such identification would be unwarranted, even presumptuous.

In response to my reply, a leading member of one of the French groups has assured me that their action was not directed against the South African physicists as such, but against the possible public-relations value to the government of holding an international conference. If such a meeting is a purely scientific event, unrestricted and open to all, I find it hard to see how its effects could be other than beneficial. For many critics it would be an opportunity to come and see for themselves to obtain first-hand knowledge (as scientists should) about conditions in a foreign country, the intellectual climate in its universities and cultural institutions, the spirit of its academics and students, rather than base their judgment on information from media that normally—say in scientific matters—they would consider unreliable or distorting.

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