

because of American reluctance to risk a global nuclear exchange following an attack on Western Europe. The hypothesis that a cruise missile from Colchester would be more favourably received than an inter-continental missile from Colorado is fragile to the point of snapping. Moreover, do we accept that we are better off because the Americans will be more willing to fire when the weapons are based on our territory rather than theirs? Three times already this decade the US has moved to a war footing without apparently consulting allies. Collective security, as well as initiatives for arms control, will suffer further if an irrevocable political commitment to the new weapons is made. We shall not escape this alarming new arms race by trying to run faster.

Boom time for private medicine

Steve Kelly writes: The abolition of the Health Services Board, to be announced shortly by Mrs Thatcher's ministerial entrepreneurs, will be yet another filip to the moguls of private medicine currently invading Britain. Already London and the North West in particular are being swamped by America's medical multinationals out to make a quick buck from the health service cutbacks, and the new *laissez-faire* brand of economics. The abolition of the board, which carefully scrutinises all applications for private hospital building, removes another obstacle set in the way of private medicine by the Labour government. Coupled with this is a new contract for hospital consultants currently being negotiated with the DHSS, which seems certain to offer consultants further encouragement to work in the private sector. The new formula will insist that consultants surrender only one-eleventh of their salary if they go part-time, rather than the previous two-elevenths.

But it is in the North West, particularly in the green belt area of Cheshire, where the boom is biggest. By the beginning of next year, BUPA (2.25 million subscribers and £9 million 'surplus' last year) will be offering Manchester the first complete private health service outside London. A screen testing centre able to give regular medicals to its subscribers will open in the city centre alongside a nursing agency which can provide home nursing. At the same time BUPA's 62 bed hospital in unfashionable Whalley Range in Manchester is being extended to provide 86 beds and two new operating theatres.

And on the outskirts of the city at Cheadle the Americans have moved in to start building the largest private hospital in the country. American Medical International (head office — Beverly Hills) plans a 150 bed, £6 million complex to rival its Princess Grace and Harley Street clinics in London. Other American companies, including one registered in the Cayman Isles, are also known to be scouring the North West for suitable sites and partners.

In London the Wellington, St John's Wood, is owned by Humana, which controls two per cent of all American hospitals. At £900 per week clients at its 102 bed hospital (130 nurses) tend to be of the richer variety. Hospital Corporation International of Nashville and another American group, Hospital Affiliates, are also setting up in Britain.

To the north of Manchester at Rochdale, a new hospital owned by a consortium of local businessmen and consultants has been operational for some years while another is being planned by the Oldham-based Clinicare. Specialist in cosmetic operations and vasectomies, Clinicare is unashamedly profit motivated and forecasts that big business will soon jump on the bandwagon. And Grand Metropolitan Hotels is known to have made discreet inquiries already about buying into the private hospital business though so far has made no firm offers.

For the moment British business is generally biding its time, content to see organisations like BUPA and PPP (Private Patients Plan) expand with its help. While private subscriptions have been falling over the last few years, company subscriptions have boomed during the years of wage



restraint. BUPA claims that as a result of deals with various trade unions, it now covers 40,000 union members. It remains a charity (although its subscriptions are not tax deductible), but its service at £50 a day for five-star accommodation, plus consultants and operation fees on top, make it essentially a profit-making business. If it fails to make a 'surplus', as BUPA prefers to call it, then it cannot survive.

France fears falling birth rate

Jane Jessel writes from Paris: The French parliament's debate and vote on the abortion law this week contained a dimension that will be lacking from discussions on the Corrie Bill at Westminster. Those opposing the renewal of Simone Veil's 1974 Act (which was introduced experimentally for five years and legalises abortion only in the first ten weeks of pregnancy) have introduced, in addition to religious and moral objections, an argument to strike at the heart of every patriotic Frenchman — *dénatalité*, or the falling of the birth rate. This anti-abortion lobby is largely composed of members of one of the more overtly nationalistic French political parties, the Gaullists. During the July European elections, in which Mme Veil was a leading candidate, former Gaullist Prime Minister Michel Debré consistently attacked the abortion law and criticised Mme Veil for 'presiding over a steep decline in the birth rate.'

Monique Pelletier, Minister for Women's Affairs, announced last month that the number of abortions, as far as could be ascertained, had not increased since the Act was passed: it remained at around 250,000 a year. The law had made medically safe many abortions which would formerly have been carried out secretly, she said. Nevertheless, the government is taking *dénatalité* seriously, judging by the measures it has taken to persuade French couples to produce more children.

Over the past few years it has been successful in reducing perinatal deaths through making maternity benefits conditional on regular medical checks during pregnancy. Family allowances were increased for third and subsequent children. Last month Mme Pelletier announced yet more measures to induce couples to increase their families — at a time when the government is trying to limit public spending. These include higher family allowances for three or more children, giving large families at least 3 per cent greater real incomes than smaller ones; cheap public transport for parents and third and subsequent children; continued payment of family allowances for those children still in education between the ages of 18 and 20; birth grants of 10,000 francs (about £1,150) for third and subsequent children; lump sum payments of 8120 francs to replace the present system of postnatal payments which currently total 2467 francs over two years; maternity leave to be increased from four to six months; right to retirement benefit for all mothers of three or more children; and 100 per cent loans for the purchase of larger homes.

Battered women

Felicity Jones writes: The cuts in government spending, which threaten to hit women the hardest, dominated the Scottish TUC's women's conference in Edinburgh last week. It was indeed a sad reflection on how far women still have to go towards equality to see motion after motion coming before the conference just to protect those hard-won rights which women have taken years to achieve.

The most controversial issues at the conference were abortion and the disbanding of the women's conference. A handful of delegates appeared to let their personal consciences get in the way of their representative status when it came to debating the Corrie Abortion Bill. But the conference overwhelmingly reaffirmed its commitment to campaign and demonstrate against it and support the principle of a woman's right to choose, in spite of the gory picture-waving of unborn foetuses by one delegate.

It was ironic that the siren song for the conference to disband itself should coincide with what was without doubt one of the most militant-minded and passionately committed conferences in many years (it was the first two-day conference in its fifty-two year history). The movers' claim that the women's conference was only a 'talking shop' into which women had been conveniently sidetracked met with howls of protest from the floor. But it took Welsh-woman Dilys Hardacre, a delegate from the white collar engineers' union, TASS, to point out that, though it was a splendid notion in an ideal world, it would be sheer lunacy for women trade unionists to throw away their only weapon at the time of such a concerted attack on their rights. Every attempt to get a similar conference for Wales had fallen so far on deaf ears, she said. Amid all the hue and cry, it was admitted that more needed to be done at grassroots level to get women involved in union affairs and to get issues taken up by the Scottish TUC, perhaps with a day set aside at each national conference to debate motions passed at the women's conference. At least one major union, the AUEW, has changed its mind about giving women two permanent seats on the STUC General Council and now favours the idea. So that should make the vote a lot closer at the next STUC conference, though the GMWU and the TGWU are still opposed. There are already two seats reserved for women on the TUC General Council, and there are calls to increase the number to nine.

A nuclear attack

Duncan Campbell writes: The Anti-Nuclear Campaign (ANC), launched last Saturday, is a new umbrella organisation aimed to stop nuclear power. The distinctive feature of the ANC is the emphasis — due in no small part to Arthur Scargill's alarm at his perception of the 'brown rice and sandals' image of other nuclear critics — on a platform broad enough to accommodate trade unions as well as environmental groups. Thus the campaign doesn't merely propose the halting of the nuclear power programme and the development of alternative energy sources, but also stresses the need to 'guarantee employment during the changeover' (away from nuclear generation of electricity).

The campaign's present steering committee is carefully designed to include union activists, regional anti-nuclear groups from Scotland to the southwest, and organisations as diverse as the Socialist Workers' Party and the Conservation Society. Some active groups — principally the Friends of the Earth — have not joined the coalition, while others — like the London Greenpeace movement — oppose any central organisation on principle. But most of these critics recognise the valuable role that can be played by the ANC. Most unions, even some with members inside the nuclear industry, are ill-informed on energy issues. Many unions have no clear policy on nuclear power, and thus tend to drift with the historical consensus when the subject is debated, as at this year's TUC (see NS 14 September). Resistance is, however, growing. Apart from working within the Labour movement, ANC plans to assist local groups with information and leaflets. Brown rice will not be available.