

K. William Kapp

Workers told of peril of technology

From Ian Murray
Labour Staff,
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Society is sitting on top of a time-bomb which may explode in the foreseeable future. Some experts believe that the "final catastrophe" may only be 20 to 50 years away.

Delegates to an international conference at Oberhausen on the "quality of life" were given this gloomy view of the future by Dr Fred Polak, Professor of Sociology at Wassenaar, in the Netherlands.

The conference has been called by IG Metall, the West German metal workers' union, to try to assess the future challenges that industrialized society must face.

Dr Polak said that modern technology could advance to the point at which social engineers would be the true masters of a completely conformist society which could no longer be distinguished from a mass concentration camp. We might ultimately be directed by a superstructure of intelligent machines.

Public reaction should stop this but technology was still endangering us all through pollution. "We

are living in the highest acceleration in the whole of human history. Our generation has much less time than any previous generation had at its disposal", he said. Revolutionary changes in the next 30 years would be farther-reaching than many over the past 3,000 years.

"The greatest need of our time is our need of time", Dr Polak said. Even being moderately optimistic we had to move very fast indeed to find a solution.

"Here we meet a formidable obstacle, that of the ill-reputed political inertia. Whatever we want to accomplish with regard to science, research and technology can only be the result of efficient political decision-making. However, mostly political interest is opportunistic and rather restricted as to time scale—that is, until the next election."

Professor Gerald Antoine, Rector of the Academy of Orleans, saw the need for time to educate. He drew a contrast between the vacuum of men's minds and the overcrowding of the earth. "We are going faster and longer distances, but where are we going?" he asked.

Dr Hugo Schuck, of the United

States Department of Transportation, said the time had come to eliminate the private car because of the pollution and congestion caused by it. Study showed that a return to rail transport was needed, with very fast trains running underground, like a huge tube system.

Because transport impinged on so many other aspects of life he suggested that planners should try to work with models of society as a shipbuilder did in a testing tank, so that real people were not involved in social experiments.

Dr Karl Kapp, Professor of Economics at Basle University, said the ecological crisis was growing faster in industrial societies than the gross national product. More harm was being done to the environment by 400 million Europeans and Americans than by 800 million Chinese.

He did not believe that computerized estimates of the end of the world need be accurate. Had there been a computer in 1872, he said, it would probably have predicted that by now there would be so many horse-drawn vehicles that it would be impossible to clear up all the manure.