Director's Corner

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New hope for Europe

Today's issue features a Director's Corner from Brian Foster, GDE European Regional Director.

My last Director's Corner in January summarised the situation in Europe as far as it could be discerned through the still-settling dust after "Black December". Six months later, it is appropriate and useful to revisit the new landscape in Europe. The good news is that very little has changed outside the UK. The strong involvement in many of the other European states has not been affected by "Black December"; fortunately, it has been recognised for what it was, a one-off, knee-jerk reaction to a funding shortfall, rather than any sort of considered judgement as to the merit of the ILC project or the ongoing R&D programme.

In the UK, too, there has been a significant rowing back from the hard-line and highly undiplomatic rhetoric of the Chief Executive of the Science & Technology Facilities Council, STFC, the body that funds particle physics and astronomy research in the UK. The publication of a report on the whole STFC debacle by the Parliamentary "Select Committee", the watch-dog over the government department to which STFC is answerable, drew gasps of astonishment from all who read it. It was a damning indictment, outspoken in its criticism of many of STFC's decisions, including the UK's attitude to the ILC and particularly the lack of due process. The UK government recently replied to some of the Select Committee's criticisms. One section in particular is worth quoting: “Although it is true STFC has chosen not to ramp-up investment in the current International Linear Collider project, STFC will continue to participate in developing global strategies for future Linear Colliders and continues to honour its commitments to the common development fund.” Indeed, only a few weeks after the STFC crisis blew up, I was very gratified that senior STFC management were anxious to find a way forward that would preserve the core expertise of the UK in linear colliders, as well as its leadership positions in the ILC. Support for me as European Director has continued, and we have now negotiated that all of the leading managers in the ILC structure drawn up by the Project Managers can continue their work. However, the resources available to them have been strongly reduced. The accelerator R&D programme relating to linear colliders will be reduced to 25 percent of its level before "Black December". The uncertainty and loss of morale has also led to several of the UK's most promising young researchers leaving the field. ILC detector R&D in the CALICE and Linear Collider Flavour Identification (LCFI) collaborations can also hopefully continue at a reduced level inside a new "generic R&D" line that STFC is opening up. Throughout the crisis, the Linear Collider collaboration in the UK (LCUK) has remained determined to rescue the UK's participation in future planning for world particle physics.

Even though the situation for the ILC in the UK now looks clearer, the fallout from the STFC crisis continues. One direct consequence was the government's decision to set up a review on the health of physics in the UK under the chairmanship of Professor Bill Wakeham, Vice-Chancellor of Southampton University. This review is due to report in September, and could have a major influence on the future direction of physics in the UK. We await the Wakeham conclusions with interest. In the meantime, the ILC activity in Europe is now back to business as usual. The final physics plenary meeting of EuroTeV, the European Union 6th Framework Programme project due to end at the end of the year, will take place in Uppsala from 26 to 28 August. The European members of the GDE will take the opportunity to have a lunchtime meeting on 26 August to discuss the future prospects and strategy for the next phase of the ILC. Directly afterwards, on 29 August, the new 7th Framework Programme project, ILC-HiGrade, will have its kick-off meeting at DESY, Hamburg. ILC-HiGrade has two main aims: to make continued progress towards delivering superconducting rf cavities that reproducibly reach 35 MV/m; and to advance preparations on siting and governance issues for the ILC. The latter is also being taken up by the GDE itself and by the ILCSC. As "Black December" fades to an unpleasant memory, Europe is looking to the future of the ILC with renewed commitment and hope.

-- Brian Foster