

# CZECH WRITERS ARE GIVEN THEIR ORDERS

The congress of the Czech Writers' Union, which concluded at the weekend, was a sad occasion brightened only by the fact that no writer of any stature could be found to lend his name to the ceremonial retreat from intellectual freedom in Czechoslovakia. The new chairman, Mr Jan Kozak, is a minor figure who was elected after the regime had failed to persuade anyone with more prestige to fill the post. The union itself is also new. It was set up last November to replace the proud old union which fought so hard to extend the frontiers of expression in the late 1960s and played an important role in promoting and debating the reforms of 1968. That union was forced out of existence in 1970 when its buildings and assets were seized. Only the name remains.

Now the new union is putting the

clock back not just to the period immediately before 1968 but much farther. If any evidence were needed, Mr Kozak provided it when he remarked in his speech that the "signal for the attack on the socialist orientation of Czechoslovak literature" had been given in 1963 at the conference on Franz Kafka. This was the famous conference at which the Czechs led by Professor Goldstücker fought successfully against the lonely and bitter opposition of the East Germans for the right to publish Kafka.

Now the East Germans have won their revenge, and Czechoslovakia has fallen into line. Those who defend Kafka are accused by Mr Kozak of propagating the idea that alienation is a lasting product of the clash between the individual and society. "Kafkaism" is defined as

an attempt to create an "anti-socialist core" in the intelligentsia and among young people.

That such childish nonsense can emanate from a body claiming to represent Czech writers says all that needs to be said about the destruction of cultural life in Czechoslovakia today. It explains why the rich stream of books, plays, and films which flowed out of Prague in the late sixties has now dried up. The new policy has little to do with ideology. It is primarily the revenge of the old guard of the party for the scare they had in 1968. This was made clear last week by *Rude Pravo*, the party paper, in a bitter editorial promising that "we will not forget the shameful fourth congress of the Writers' Union in 1967"—when several writers spoke out against party policy.