

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## Jobcentre Plus, minus anti-violence screens, equals injured workers

A serious work dispute is taking place in London over the removal of safety screens. The dispute involves Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) members who work in the Department for Work and Pensions (former Department of Social Security) and the Employment Service. Workers want to be defended against serious physical assaults but management are insisting on the removal of protective screens. Indefinite strikes have been called in London at the new Jobcentre Plus offices in Streatham and Brent. The strike was extended to more offices nationwide on 22nd October when management failed to respond to workers' safety concerns.

### Background

A new national government agency is being created: called Jobcentre Plus, it combines benefit offices and jobcentres on the same sites. For over a year the PCS has been trying to work out an agreement with management on proper protection for staff against assaults at work. Assaults in benefits offices doubled last year.

The agency senior management wants to remove safety screens from nearly all the new offices. The spin they put on their proposals is that this would improve relations between staff and the public and reduce assaults.

The evidence drawn from workplace experience tells a different story. Since November last year there have been 40 serious assaults in jobcentres, including five with knives, one with an iron bar, two with petrol, and even one with a firearm.

Nationally the picture is horrendous:



PHOTO: ROD LEN 07711-407840/PCS

- A jobcentre at Staveley was firebombed.
- A policeman was stabbed in an incident at a jobcentre in Croydon.
- 14 computer monitors were thrown at staff in a West Yorkshire office.
- In addition a security guard was recently hospitalised after a hammer attack in the Benefits Agency office in Bradford.

The action is just the latest in a decade of concern about violence to jobcentre staff (see *The Daily Hazard* June and December 1996\*).

### The workers' position

Staff believe that people whose work involves delivering benefits must be protected by safety screens, which over the last quarter of a century have protected them effectively. They are solidly backed by PCS.

According to Chris Ford of the Central & West London PCS, 'Most benefit claimants pose no risk at all to staff. But in the case of a very small minority, there is always a risk of a hostile

reaction, given the harshness of the benefits system and the unwelcome decisions staff often have to give. Everyone has an absolute right to work without the constant fear of assault and injury.'

'We're all for improving services to the public,' comments Streatham union representative John Stanley, 'but we don't see that coming at the expense of our members' health and safety. The public understand why screens have to be there and the vast majority don't have any problem. If there was a suitable alternative to a physical barrier that ensured the safety of our members, we would consider it, but nobody has come up with one yet.'

PCS official Frank Bonner adds: 'Only last week we received a report of a security guard in Bradford being assaulted by a member of the public wielding a hammer. Removing security screens from benefit offices will place many more of our members at risk of this kind of assault.'

### Management intimidation

'In the run up to the action PCS

members were given a clear indication of the shape of things to come if we lose this fight,' says Chris Ford. 'Employment Service bosses let loose a campaign of lies and intimidation of our members in jobcentres to deter workers from striking.'

Management tactics have included one to one interviews where:

- Casual staff were told they would be sacked
- Staff on probation were told they would not complete it
- Staff on temporary promotion were told they wouldn't get it again
- Staff were told striking would undermine their promotion prospects
- Staff were phoned at home on day one of the strike by management

'Management bullying tactics have continued during the strike,' says Ford, 'but have been a failure; people have been joining the strike action.'

### The larger picture

A strike ballot has been completed in other Jobcentre Plus 'pathfinder' offices threatened with removal of safety screens. The result of the ballot is a clear call for strike action.

Union negotiators say their striking members can expect 'a similar torrent of misinformation and propaganda as the London strikers experienced.' Over 400 members in Neasden, Streatham, Balham and Wandsworth are supporting the action at present. Elsewhere, there are arguments with

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# Campaign seeks Justice for Christopher

A campaign group is seeking justice for the death of twelve year old Christopher Pullen who died when a dismounted door fell on top of him on the estate where he lived. As yet no individual or organisation has been charged with offences that may have led to Christopher's death and the campaign group demands to know why.

The steel-reinforced door that killed Christopher had been dismounted from its frame, possibly by fire officers attending an incident months before the fatal injury on the Market Estate, Islington. The door was never re-hung or taken away, but, campaigners say, was left standing upright in the stairwell of the Southdown block. Several complaints were made to the Council about the door, campaigners say once in the 'very urgent repair category' almost two months before the accident, but nothing was done.

On 8th September last year Christopher was playing with friends when the door crashed down on him. Five days later he was pronounced dead.

Campaigners say that what happened, or didn't happen, in the next few months constitutes a serious failure of the criminal justice system with no-one being charged for Christopher's death.

They say:

- The police say they were not informed of the accident until 44 hours after it occurred
- The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) did not begin its investigation until a full week after Christopher died and twelve days after the incident
- Key witnesses, including the paramedic who treated Christopher at the scene, were not called to give evidence at the Coroner's Inquest
- The HSE only interviewed two people, both employees of the organisations involved
- No connection was drawn in the HSE report between the wet, slippery floor and the fact that Christopher was



PHOTO: JUSTICE FOR CHRISTOPHER CAMPAIGN

**Christopher Pullen was playing when the unsecured steel door crushed him**

lying on the floor when the door hit him

- Confusion over who might have left the door standing upright in the stairwell and when has been used by HSE as an excuse not to prosecute

The HSE refused to prosecute, pleading 'lack of evidence'. The

Coroner in the case, Dr. Hungerford, urged them to reconsider: they apparently refused.

It was in the light of these events that Christopher's family, along with the Independent Working Class Association and local tenants, launched the Justice for Christopher Campaign in August this year. They organised a 'Convoy for Christopher' from the estate to Islington Town Hall where they held a vigil on the anniversary of the incident.

Campaigners say the family have never received an explanation or apology from their landlord, Islington Council, or the company responsible for managing the estate, Hyde Northside Housing Association. The family wants the HSE to re-investigate with a view to bringing charges against those responsible. The family has also launched a civil suit for compensation against Islington Council and Northside Housing Association.

- Justice for Christopher Campaign, tel: 07000 752 752

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## London work deaths rise

Published in late October, the 2000-2001 figures for health and safety casualties showed the most deaths at work since 1994. A fortnight earlier, the HSE published its strategic plan for the 'revitalising' of health and safety in the UK. In between, in European Health and Safety Week, construction employers gathered at a conference in London's Docklands to contemplate their responsibility for over a third of these deaths.

In London last year, 33 people were killed at work, 16 of them construction workers. Recorded major and 'over-3-day' injuries to self-employed building workers more than doubled: 195 were reported, which means there may have been at least 4,000 self-employed workers report fewer than 1 in 20 of their significant injuries. The overall rate of reporting injuries in the industry has dropped from 55% in 1997 to

49%. The deaths, injuries and reporting failures reflect the insidious role of the subcontracting 'lump' in construction safety.

Yet there was no increase in enforcement action. Prosecutions and convictions in London and the south east were at roughly the same level as for the last five years and enforcement notices were at their lowest. London courts are handing down the same average fine for health and safety offences as in 1998, just over £5,000.

Meanwhile, Londoners continue to die at work from preventable causes. Recent deaths that we know of include:

- Cormac Nordon (44) who was working for a Northern Ireland based subcontractor was crushed and decapitated when a massive electrical control panel fell on him at the DS8 building

construction site at Canary Wharf.

- Father-of-two Alhaji Zacharia Conteh, of Deptford, died of burns after a huge vat of boiling soup exploded over him. The 35-year-old was working in the kitchens of the New Covent Garden Soup Company in Willesden.
- An electrician suffered 60% burns in an electrical explosion at a Durkan construction site in the Kings Cross area.
- Jim Harris, 23, an employee of Essex-based contractor Trident Scaffolding and Cradle company, fell three stories from an advertising hoarding. The HSE has slapped prohibition notices on Trident and on the Northampton-based company which allocates advertising space, Bscene.
- On August 11 a four year old

girl, Yasmin Ladjouzi, was killed when a scaffold in Cobham Close, Bromley collapsed.

- Marc Polden, 30, from Poole, Dorset, was working on a small building conversion in Kensington and Chelsea, London W11 when he was engulfed in a fireball. He died of his injuries two days later. Mr Polden is believed to have been removing redundant fuel tanks from a disused garage to enable the building to be converted into offices when petrol vapour was ignited by a spark from an angle grinder.
- A railway worker acting as a lookout was struck by two trains. The man, working for Amec, was part of an infrastructure maintenance team working in Purley Oaks railway station. He died at the scene.

# DERMATITIS IN THE WORKPLACE

**Dermatitis is inflammation of the skin. It affects about one in five people at some time in their lives. It can be acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term and persistent). Dermatitis is not a minor complaint: chronic dermatitis can make work impossible. It is one of the most widespread causes of ill-health at work, affecting people in many industry sectors.**

## Is your dermatitis caused by work?

**Occupational dermatitis** is normally contact dermatitis. Possible clues to a work-related cause:

- The complaint follows exposure to work to a substance, improves when the employee is away from work and recurs when s/he is again exposed to that substance on returning to work.
- The dermatitis appears on areas of skin which have been exposed to a substance at work
- Other people working with the substance have similar symptoms.

## Symptoms

Itching, pain, redness, soreness, cracked skin, swelling, bleeding from skin, formation of small blisters or wheals (itchy red circles with a white centre) on the skin.

## How dermatitis starts

Occupational contact dermatitis starts as a local inflammation of the skin but can lead to chronic skin disease. The inflammation is caused by an irritation or an allergy as a result of substances found in the workplace that come into direct contact with the skin.

Irritant contact dermatitis is caused by substances that physically damage the skin or its protective oils. Damage may be immediate or gradual.

Allergic contact dermatitis develops in stages. Skin reaction may occur after just a few days' exposure, or only after a lifetime's. The allergenic action of a substance depends on its ability to destroy the protective action of the skin so that the allergen can penetrate.

Once the skin is penetrated, sensitisation begins. The process can last from 4 days to 3 weeks with no sign of skin damage at this stage.

To cause sensitisation the allergenic substance combines with the skin proteins and is carried around the whole body by white blood cells called lymphocytes, which form part of the body's immune system. The immune system has a 'memory', enabling it to recognise and neutralise substances more than once. When a sensitised worker is re-exposed to the substance, the lymphocytes recognise

the allergen and react with it, releasing tissue damaging chemicals called lymphokines. This is when symptoms appear. If there is no further contact with the allergen, sensitivity may gradually decline.

## Causes

- Chemical irritants: alkalis like caustic soda, fresh mixed cement, acids, metals such as nickel, solvents and hydrocarbons etc.
- Chemical sensitisers: dye intermediates, dyes, photographic developers, rubber accelerators and antioxidants, insecticides, oils, resins, coal tar derivatives, explosives and plasticisers etc.
- Plants and their products: cinnamon, henna, primrose
- Biological agents: grain, copra, scabies, dairy men itch
- Mechanical: cuts, abrasions followed by secondary infection to wound, repeated trauma between tool and skin pressure point
- Physical factors: heat causes perspiration and softening of outer layer of skin, causing rash or reddening of skin; cold – chilblain/frostbite; burns – usually by fire, electricity, sun, ionising radiation
- Amount and concentration of the substance in contact with the skin
- Length and frequency of the exposure
- Stress

## What the law says

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (MHSW) and Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999 (COSHH), employers have a legal duty to assess the risks which could cause dermatitis and hence to prevent employees coming into contact with substances which can cause dermatitis. Under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR), diagnosed cases of occupational dermatitis must be reported to the Health and Safety Executive.

'Non-infective' dermatitis is a prescribed industrial disease and sufferers may be entitled to incapacity or disablement benefit.

## Prevention

- Assess all hazardous substances under COSHH using both manufacturers safety data sheets and information on the specific workplace
- Stop using substances concerned, by either substituting a less hazardous substance, or

re-designing the job to eliminate chemicals altogether

- If the substance cannot be substituted, redesign the process to prevent hazardous exposures, for example by enclosing the system
- Provide adequate welfare facilities (washing and drying close to work area) and ensure aggressive cleaning materials are not themselves a factor
- Carry out health surveillance, via occupational health nurses or doctors or competent personnel
- Provide adequate information, instruction, training and supervision to employees
- Ensure substances requiring dilution are handled correctly and diluted before being distributed
- Store and label substances correctly with the appropriate hazards warning and instructions on neutralising
- Barrier creams and personal protective equipment, such as gloves, aprons, face shields and overalls, are a last resort. If used, the employer should provide and maintain them and they must be suitable for both the job and the workers. Many substances can penetrate ordinary creams and rubber gloves, which can then hold the substance against the skin.

## What safety reps should do

- Find out about the extent of the problem using surveys and body mapping
- Raise awareness amongst members
- Negotiate for assessment and trials of substitute products and processes
- Make sure any member affected claims for benefits and/or brings a civil claim through union lawyers

## Further information

*Preventing dermatitis at work.* HSE booklet no INDG233. Single copies free from HSE Books, 01787 881165. Useful booklet which mentions role of safety reps.

*'Body of evidence.'* Hazards, no 61, January 1998, p10-11. online free at [www.hazards.org/diyresearch](http://www.hazards.org/diyresearch) or back issues £6 (£3 for subscribers) from [sub@hazards.org](mailto:sub@hazards.org), tel 01142 67 8936. Article on how to do body mapping.

*London Hazards Centre factsheets: Safety Data Sheets, Chemical safety law* ([www.lhc.org.uk/members/pubs/factsht/63fact.htm](http://www.lhc.org.uk/members/pubs/factsht/63fact.htm))

## Jobs and substances

Just a sample of occupations where dermatitis can happen and substances responsible

OCCUPATIONS	SUBSTANCES
Artists	Turpentine, pigments, dyes, colophony, epoxy resin
Car industry	Chromates, nickel, cobalt, rubber, resins
Bakers and confectioners	Flavours and spices, orange, lemon, essential oils, dyes
Bartenders	Orange, lemon, lime flavours
Bookbinders	Glues, resins, leathers
Butchers	Nickel, sawdust
Carpenters	Stains, glues, woods, turpentine, varnishes, colophony
Cleaners	Rubber (latex) gloves, cleaning materials
Construction workers	Chromates, cobalt, rubber and leather gloves, resins, woods
Cooks and caterers	Foods, preservatives, flavours, rubber gloves,
Dentistry	Local anaesthetics, mercury, methacrylates, eugenol
Electricians	Fluxes, resins, rubber
Electroplaters	Nickel, chromium, cobalt
Embalmers	Formaldehyde
Floor-layers	Cement, resins, wood varnish
Florists and gardeners	Plants, pesticides, rubber gloves
Hairdressers	Dyes, persulphates, nickel, perfumes, rubber (latex) gloves
Jewellers	Epoxy resin, metals, soldering fluxes
Mechanics	Rubber gloves, chromates, epoxy resin, antifreeze
Medical personnel	Rubber (latex) gloves, anaesthetics, antibiotics, antiseptics
Metal workers	Nickel, chromates, additives in some cutting oils
Office workers	Rubber, nickel, glue
Painters	Thinners, fillers, adhesives, paints
Photography	Rubber gloves, developers, phenols, sodium metabisulphite
Printers	Solvents, talc, zinc stearate
Textile workers	Fibres, bleaching agents, solvents
Veterinarians	Disinfectants, wet work, animals

## REVIEW

**Trust us, we're experts! – how industry manipulates science and gambles with your future.**

By Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber.

The quick review of this book is: read it – it's great.

It gives a history of how the public relations industry manipulates scientific and public opinion to the advantage of industry. Some of this was covered in their previous, and also recommended, 'Toxic sludge is good for you.' But there's plenty of new material here.

Even if you know the methods the PR industry uses you will still be stunned by the huge range of examples of what these shameless bastards get up to in the name of profit or political advantage; as well as the risk they are willing to put the rest of us at, to ensure they gain these advantages.

Health and safety is well covered – asbestos, benzene, Bhopal, cancer, chlorine, DDT, dioxin, lead, mining, occupational diseases, PCBs, pesticides, waste incineration etc.

There are excellent sections on the history of how risk assessment was introduced to give industry the advantage by making it look like their decisions on health and safety were based on a sound scientific methodology. This is still used to sell their 'safe' products to the general public and has made it easier for government to license their actions.

Risk assessment also gives industry and government a way to avoid the precautionary principle, having to prove something is safe before unleashing it on the world.

All together a very scary picture of industry and how it is willing to risk all our lives.

● *Trust us, we're experts! – how industry manipulates science and gambles with your future.* Tarcher/Putnam, 2001. 1-58542-059-X. £21.99.



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Registered Charity No: 293677

This organisation is funded by London Boroughs Grants

## Free training for Black/Minority Ethnic voluntary sector

The centre has acquired a grant for three years from the Community Fund to run a health and safety training project for the Black and Minority Ethnic voluntary sector in London.

This new project has evolved from the previous three-year Voluntary Sector Training Project which reached 552 voluntary organisations in London with the aim of assisting them to become a safer place to work. The project was extremely successful. In particular it revealed the extent of stress and lone working as hazards in the London voluntary sector.

Final evaluation also showed that the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Organisations are often different in terms of



requiring closer support and of language and cultural requirements.

In the new BME Voluntary Sector Training project we will be recruiting over 300 organisations to receive free training and support. The training will cover most aspects of workplace health and safety.

● Interested organisations should contact Mumtaz Mahmood (mumtaz@lhc.org.uk)

● We are recruiting workers to carry out this project: see our website or contact the Centre

## European activists meet in Vienna

The eighth European Work Hazards Network (EWHN) Conference was held in Vienna, Austria in September. Over 220 delegates from most European countries plus some from Japan, USA and Africa debated health and safety issues for three days.

These very successful conferences sprang from meetings organised by the Hazards Campaign in the UK and similar groups around the EU in the run in to the single European market in 1992. Since the original one in Strasbourg they have been held in Rimini, Copenhagen, Edinburgh and Sheffield. They give shop floor reps, academics and activists the opportunity to meet and discuss common ground and developments in the field of occupational health and safety.

This year Mick Holder was delegated to attend by the Centre. Mick organised an international asbestos exhibition for the conference by combining a UK section with some of the South African asbestos miners exhibition and one on shipworkers with asbestos diseases brought from Japan to make an excellent exhibit.

Workshops covered a range of topics including hours of work, stress, isocyanates, migrant workers, corporate crime, WTO and globalisation, bullying, role of the safety rep, emfs etc.

Information sessions were also held on asbestos, mineral fibres, developments in the USA etc.

*Continued from front page*

management about strokes they have pulled to try to circumvent the London strike. Union members at Ashton-in-Makerfield near Wigan are seeking a meeting with Minister Ian McCartney over plans to use workers in the Wigan office to do work normally processed in Balham and Streatham.

PCS negotiator Eddie Spence says: 'We will continue to talk to management and hope that a solution can be found to the dispute. Our members have always made it clear to management that health and safety at work is an issue that cannot be compromised. We want to negotiate an effective joint agreement with management that will ensure that members have a safe and secure working environment!'

\* 'HSE issues violence notice (well almost)', Daily Hazard December 1996, www.lhc.org.uk/members/pubs/newslet/531296.htm

### TRAINING COURSES AT LHC

The Centre provides training on a range of health and safety issues including risk assessment, COSHH, asbestos, VDU work, stress etc. Courses coming up are:

- **Tuesday 15th January 2002**  
*Introduction to Workplace Safety Management*
- **Thursday 31st January 2002**  
*VDU Hazards and DSE Assessments*
- **Tuesday 12th February 2002**  
*Conducting Workplace Risk Assessment*
- **Thursday 7th March 2002**  
*Tackling Stress At Work*

The cost is just £40 per person for a one day course. We can also design training for your workplace. Call us for details.