NEWS FROM THE LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE FEBRUARY 1985

THE DAILY HAZARD

Privatisation and rubbish

A danger of privatisation — breaking the law on health and safety at work — has come to light in a report from the London Hazards Centre.

Last October, the Centre's occupational hygienist carried out a safety inspection of the hopper side-plates and safety devices of dustcarts used by Wastecare Limited. For two years, this company, which was formerly known as Grandment and GIS Waste Services, had been under contract to Wandsworth Council to provide refuse services.

Of 13 vehicles examined, nine had damaged hoppers and only five had working safety devices — the others either had no devices or they were damaged and useless.

Damage to two of the hoppers was considered dangerous. One of the carts had jagged pieces of metal sticking out from its side — at "face height" for a child cyclist.

The purpose of safety devices on the 4cwt giant "Paladin" bins is to prevent the bins from being lifted to tip their contents into the hopper unless the load is secured. Without safety guards, the bin can be released from its clamp at the same time as it is being lowered or raised. A full bin can weight up to 8cwt.

The report stated: "In the past, people have been killed or seriously injured when working without these safety devices", and recommended that the vehicles with no or defective devices be taken out of commission immediately to remedy the situation. The safety devices are simple, effective and easy to fit.

Dustcarts that Wastecare had bought from Wandsworth Council had been fitted with the appropriate safety devices at the time of the sale.

Before the London Hazards Centre's survey, the GMBATU safety rep at Wastecare had been concerned that the vehicles weren't being properly maintained (maintenance services have also been put out to private contractors in Wandsworth). He had brought up the issue of safety with the Wastecare management: employers have a legal duty to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the safety of workers.

Within a week of the Centre's report, safety guards were being fitted to all Wastecare vehicles. The Health and Safety Executive subsequently visited the Wastecare premises.


BALHAM & TOOTING News

Nurses rape terror

Friday, November 2, 1984 Price 12p

Deathtrap dustcart

EXCLUSIVE By Vanessa Bridge

Both students

White and tall

TEFAL DURABASE NON-STICK COOKWARE 25% OFF

For hazards issues, local publicity can be useful

VDUs swamp the hazards centre

In October, the London Hazards Centre was featured on Thames TV's *Help!* programme. Almost in passing, it was mentioned that the Centre had dealt with inquiries on the hazards of visual display units (VDUs). In the following hour, Centre workers and volunteers were inundated with calls on a variety of hazards, but overwhelmingly on VDUs.

The modern office, it seems, has become the high-tech equivalent of the Victorian "sweat shop." Nearly 80 per cent of the calls on VDUs were from non-unionised women workers who were expected to work on the screen for six to eight hours a day with no regular breaks — and who were suffering!

The majority reported eyestrain, headaches, backaches, and muscle/tendon pain in wrists, arms, neck and shoulders. High among the concerns was worry about risks of VDU use during pregnancy.

Comparison of our particular cases with other studies on VDU operators shows that these problems are not unique. A study by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the USA found that stress among VDU operators was higher than for any other group of workers.

And a study in Canada by the Canadian Labour Congress showed that roughly one in ten VDU workers experienced the three main stress symptoms — eyestrain, headache and backache — almost every day. More significantly, the study found that workers who spent more than four hours a day on a VDU, or who worked for more than 1½ hours without a break, reported twice as many stress symptoms.

Where unions in the UK have negotiated agreements on new technology and VDU work, significant gains have been won, such as limiting the time spent on the VDU to four hours a day, with regular stress breaks, and rights to transfer to other work when pregnant.

The London Hazards Centre has produced an information pack on VDU hazards that summarises some of the best information and advice.

If you would like a pack, please send £1 to the London Hazards Centre, 103 Borough Road, London SE1.

INSIDE

The London Hazards Centre is GLC-funded

How "black asbestos" fed the Oxford Circus fire

The disastrous fire at Oxford Circus tube station in November demonstrated again that asbestos, supposedly the fire-fighter's best friend, can make fires more dangerous.

Widespread use of asbestos in tunnels and subways failed to stop rapid growth of a fire that could have claimed hundreds of casualties if it had happened during the rush hour.

Even worse, bituminous asbestos tunnel linings behind the plastic skin of the Victoria Line northbound tunnel actually fed the fire and contributed to the dense black smoke filling the station.

Most of the three-week delay in re-opening the Victoria Line was due to asbestos. The fire-damaged tunnel lining had to be stripped out, debris cleared up and bagged, and deadly dust vacuumed up.

The Oxford Circus fire was one of a series over the last 18 months in which bituminous asbestos coatings burned fiercely and released clouds of asbestos. The first was in July 1983 when an army depot blaze at Donnington rained asbestos

debris over 15 square miles of Shropshire.

Then came a fire at Erith — where local residents were reassured that the descending dust was "the safe white kind." In the summer, a massive warehouse fire at Cricklewood distributed black smuts containing asbestos all over London.

The year ended with asbestos raining down on Sheffield from another warehouse fire; schools closed while playgrounds were decontaminated.

The huge public health risk revealed by these fires must give high priority to the identification and removal of bituminous asbestos coatings. Safety reps could make this the subject of a special investigation or inspection under the Safety Representatives Regulations — and make sure that the local fire station knows about all structures where this and other forms of asbestos could be a risk.

The Oxford Circus fire was another vindication of the NUR's London No. 5 Branch's long campaign against asbestos in stations and tunnels and in the brake-blocks of trains.

John McMorrow, branch secretary, told the *Daily Hazard:* "When the Victoria Line was under construction we warned about the use of asbestos and other products we considered dangerous, but everyone, including the trade unions, listened to London Transport assurances.

"Now we have had a fire which was out of control in a few minutes — in spite of asbestos. We have members off sick from toxic fumes which may have included cyanides, and we can no longer be dismissed as cranks.

"We have an NUR annual conference decision to get asbestos removed from the tube. Now is the time to tackle it across the whole system. The stuff is everywhere."

Stripping operations often go wrong

The Hazards Centre has now been asked to inspect several stripping operations where asbestos removal went seriously wrong. We begin to wonder how often it goes right.

At Fellows Court, a pair of tower blocks in Hackney, council environmental health officers agreed to suspend stripping operations on the eve of the contractors' move to the second block.

Council officers admitted at a meeting with tenants that a satisfactory clean-up had not been done after asbestos board ceilings had been stripped out. A simple visual inspection by the Hazards Centre, on behalf on the tenants, just before the meeting showed asbestos fragments on the floor of two landings.

This made a nonsense of the daily air-sampling tests and signed visual clearances provided by the hygiene consultant employed by the stripping contractor. Council officers had relied on these documents as a guarantee that tenants could safely return to their flats.

There is no point in air sampling until the whole area is spotlessly clean to the naked eye.

Many of these problems could be prevented if tenants and trade unionists had a procedure for monitoring the whole stripping operation from the planning stage through to final clean-up. That is the idea behind a leaflet now being prepared by PAAC — People's Asbestos Action Campaign.

It outlines the steps you can take to control the stripping work from beginning to end, and contains a questionnaire to fill in once the job is finished. Your experience can then assist other groups to identify good and bad contractors.

The leaflet should be available from PAAC in February.

Details from PAAC, c/o SCAT, 31 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1, or from the London Hazards Centre. Enclose s.a.e.

SPOT NEWS

Asbestos posters

● A "Killer Dust Poster" to help publicise asbestos campaigns by trades unions, hazard groups and community organisations throughout the UK is now available from the East London Health Project. Details available from the Project, c/o Tower Hamlets Art Project, 178 Whitechapel Road, London E1. Tel: 01-247 0216.

"Non-asbestos" slates

● Pressure from building unions and community groups has helped to create a healthy resistance to asbestos cement "slates." Non-asbestos substitutes are readily available from firms such as Tunnel and Eternit.

But not all the "safe" slates are what they seem. One wolf in sheep's clothing is the "fibre-cement" slate marketed in the UK by the Belgian company J.M. Balmatt.

Under its "asbestos-free veneered surface" lurks traditional asbestos cement. No coating can prevent release of deadly fibres when these slates are cut and nailed.

Heating hazards

● The Hazards Centre has contributed material on the health hazards of different heating systems to the GLC. This information will form part of "Turning on the Heat", a resource pack on energy issues and heating problems for community groups, and should be available in February. Contact Peta Sissons, Popular Planning Unit, The Showroom, South Block, County Hall, SE1.

Video for meetings

● A new video on the dangers of asbestos in buildings should be a source of ideas for tenants and trades unionists. The video, *Dust to Dust,* opens with the death of movie actor Steve McQueen, killed by an asbestos cancer. It goes on to show how tenants in Lambeth organised to rid their flats of this cancer risk. Excellent footage shows the elaborate precautions needed to ensure safe stripping of asbestos. Details from the Hazards Centre.

E is for additives

Concern is growing among consumers over the chemicals that are added to food. Preservatives are used to extend food shelf-life, and chemicals are also added to colour, flavour and increase the bulk of what we eat, and increasingly to substitute for natural food components.

From 1986, new labelling regulations will make it compulsory for processed food to carry details of the additives on the package. These will be in the form of "E" numbers rather than the actual chemical name.

A new book "E for Additives" by Maurice Hanssen (published by Thorsons, £2.95) provides a comprehensive list of E numbers, the chemicals they refer to and what the additives are used for. The book also gives a brief summary of some of the known effects of these chemicals.

Perhaps more significant than the hazards to consumers, however, are the hazards faced by workers who manufacture these chemicals, and those who handle them during food processing and the intermediate stages of storage, packaging and distribution.

Use of additives is also closely linked to new technologies in food processing and in catering. These technological changes have serious implications for workers' jobs and their health and safety.

The Hazards Centre is setting up a food hazards group to investigate these issues, and we are interested in hearing from people who are working with food additives or food processing technology such as food irradiation, microwave catering or freezer storage.

Contact Melanie at the Hazards Centre on 01-261 9558.

Courses for safety reps

The Centre has been involved in training safety representatives on courses run by colleges, trade unions and the Workers Educational Association.

Many courses are still undersubscribed, and it is vital that all reps exploit the right to *trade union* training under the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Employment Protection Act 1975.

An employer must give safety reps paid time off to attend courses approved by their union or the TUC.

These courses differ from management-provided training in that they deal exclusively with the trade union approach to health and safety.

If your branch or workplace organisation is facing a particular issue, for example asbestos, VDUs or noise, it might be possible to get a special trade union course laid on to help deal with it.

Whatever you think your particular needs are, it is worth contacting the TUC Regional Education Office through your branch to get further information on how to get on a day-release course or get a short course organised.

The phone number of the TUC office is 01-636 4030.

● Tenants aren't so well catered for on the educational front. However, if your tenants' association would like to have a short course on any aspect of hazards in the home or outside, then please contact the Hazards Centre on 01-261 9558 and we will try to arrange something to serve your needs.

Pesticides: do they kill Pharoah's ants?

Imagine that your home is infested with ants. Pharoah's ants, that file across your rooms and clothes.

The Council arranges for your home to be sprayed periodically, telling you not to clean up after the spraying. This procedure kills the ants that are exposed to the pesticide, so that corpses of worker ants accumulate with the dirt. But the nests containing the queens and young ants aren't reached because they're hidden within the cavity walls. So, after about two months, the problem returns.

Many of the flats in one 21-storey block in Battersea have been infested for several years now, and tenants have experienced this never-ending cycle of "pest control".

One of the tenants contacted the London Hazards Centre recently, concerned that the pesticide might be harmful to people as well as ants, and wondering whether a more effective method of control might be available.

The Centre's answer was "No, the pesticide being used — called Bendiocarb — is not totally safe. And yes, there is a more effective control method."

Bendiocarb belongs to the family of chemicals known as carbamates, which are toxic to the nervous system when taken into the body through the lungs, the skin or by mouth. Longer-term effects are unknown, but carbamates are regarded as likely human carcinogens.

For a few years now, a hormonal method that controls Pharoah's ants has been available. This method involves mixing a hormone called methoprene into food baits placed all over the infested building. The worker ants then take the hormone back to the nest, where it disrupts the life-cycle of the nest colony and so destroys the infestation at source.

LONDON HAZARDS CENTRE 01 261 9558

The London Hazards Centre provides a free information service on workplace and environmental hazards to trade unions, tenants' associations and other community groups.

The five Centre workers can also give advice and help on what you can do to combat hazards and what is being done by other peope in similar situations.

The Centre is GLC-funded at present, and so our finances are uncertain beyond March this year. Please show your support for the work of the Centre by affiliating to us, or getting the organisations you're associated with to affiliate.

For 1985 affiliation rates or more information on the Centre, please contact us:

London Hazards Centre
at the Polytechnic of the South Bank
103 Borough Road
London SE1 0AA
Tel:01-261 9558

Hazards in hospital

At the end of 1984, the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union published a really useful handbook called "Hazards in the Health Service: an A to Z Guide for GMB Safety Representatives."

If you want a readable digest of hazards in the workplace, don't be put off by the title since this book will be of use in lots of other workplaces. An added bonus is that the 120-page guide is indexed.

You can buy copies from the GMBATU, Thorne House, Ruxley Ridge, Claygate, Esher, Surrey at a cost of £5.50 per copy to people in the labour movement and £8 to others.

Are you melting down under the heat?

PHOTO: FRANK HAGGIS

The 1980 Barking warehouse sodium chlorate fire would not have been covered by the CIMAH regulations

Could Bhopal happen in London?

In 1974 there was Flixborough. Twenty eight died. In 1984 there was Bhopal. Thousands, still uncounted, were killed when methyl isocyanate, possibly contaminated by the war gas phosgene, poured through the slums huddled around Union Carbide's rickety pesticides factory. Thousands more were blinded.

Could it happen here? That was the question the London Hazards Centre was asked several times by the media in the last weeks of 1984.

The short answer is Yes. A disaster on this scale may be less probable, but possible.

The same question was asked when the Health and Safety Commission's feeble new regulations for control of the most dangerous chemical installations in the UK went through Parliament in the wake of Bhopal.

Much the same answer was given by Simon Turney, chair of the GLC's Public Service and Fire Brigade Committee and by Mike Doherty, chief fire officer (operations) of the London Fire Brigade. Neither would say that some part of London will not one day join the sad litany of little-known places made forever famous by leaking or exploding chemical plants.

Nor would they identify the 12 installations in London that are covered by the new Control of Industrial Major Accident Hazard (CIMAH) Regulations. These remain an official secret. The public will have to wait a year before the new law requires a manufacturer to inform local residents of what could happen if their installation blows up or leaks.

Meanwhile, the owners of these sites and the local authorities will be getting on with the preparation of on-site and off-site emergency plans.

The CIMAH regulations are full of loopholes. For example, although they were drafted to conform with the EEC's so-called "Seveso directive" they would not actually have covered the trichlorophenol factory which devastated that Italian town in 1976.

Nuclear installations and explosives stores are exempt. The same goes for military ammunition and nuclear fuel flasks in transit, for example the loads that stop over at the Wagon Works in Ruckholt Road, Leyton.

To get on the secret list of CIMAH plants requires enormous quantities of flammable, explosive or toxic materials. In the case of chlorine gas, for instance, you won't officially by living next to a major accident hazard — and you will not be told about it — unless there is at least 50 tonnes on the site. The GLC wants these thresholds lowered.

In attempting to construct its own list of installations comprising the deadly dozen, the London Hazards Centre has found an astonishing ignorance among fire officers, environmental health officers and local residents.

Above we list the 12 areas of London known to contain CIMAH installations. In each area we name the sites which informed sources identify as major accident hazards since it was not always possible to identify *the* CIMAH site. Inclusion of an organisation does not imply any criticism of its safety standards.

Chemical sites in London

Erith
LB Bexley
Diamond Shamrock Agrochemicals, Crabtree Manor Way, Belvedere.

No doubt about this one: large storage of chlorine gas would threaten SE London if it escaped.

Greenwich
LB Greenwich
South Eastern Gas Holder Station

Storage of natural gas.

Walthamstow
LB Waltham Forest
Bush Boake Allen, Black Horse Lane, E17.

Flammables and other chemicals. More information needed to be sure this is the CIMAH plant.

Leytonstone
LB Waltham Forest
Porters Paints, Argall Avenue, E10.

Large range of flammable chemicals.

Stratford
LB Newham
Steetley Chemicals Ltd, Abbey Mills, Canning Road.

Generally thought to be the most likely CIMAH plant but this area has many rivals.

Beckton
LB Newham
North Thames Gas Holder Station

Large storage of pressurised natural gas.

Bromley by Bow
LB Tower Hamlets
South Eastern Gas Holder Station

This large installation stands out as the most obvious CIMAH risk but the area has many others including a massive bonded warehouse and underground store for rum.

Wandsworth
LB Wandsworth
Charrington Oils is most likely but *Atlas Transport, York Road,* storing thousands of tons of mixed chemicals, the *John Watney distillery, York Road,* and *British Gas* have been suggested as special risk sites.

Fulham
LB Hammersmith & Fulham
Petrofina, Carnwath Road, SW6.

25,000 tonnes of oil and petrol. Other oil and petrol stores at Townmead Road and Swedish Wharf are lesser risks.

Hydes Field
LB Richmond
Thames Water Authority, Upper Sunbury Rd, Twickenham.

Large storage of toxic water-treatment gases, including chlorine, ammonia, sulphur dioxide.

Southall
LB Ealing
Clayton Oils, Park Avenue.

12,000 tonnes of kerosene, paraffin and gas oil plus other chemicals.

Enfield
LB Enfield
Merck Sharp and Dohme, Wharf Road.

This site has 'extreme caution' instruction to firefighters but information is hard to come by.

Johnson Matthey, Jeffreys Road, has cyanide, acids, chlorine, toxic metals.

Brimsdown Estate carries a variety of risks.

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