

THE DAILY HAZARD

TU action weeds out sprays

The increasing use of weedkillers and growth-retardant sprays in London's parks, gardens and open spaces is meeting stiff resistance from local authority workers.

In June, as the local government national committee of NUPE called on its members to black the long established herbicide 2,4-D, its Waltham Forest general branch forced the council to withdraw one of the new brands of blended weedkillers, Rassapron.

The union position was strengthened by technical information from the London Hazards Centre showing that all three ingredients of the BP formulation are toxic and two of them may cause cancer.

But the real key to the success at Waltham Forest was effective trade union organisation.

The story began in April when NUPE health & safety rep Tom Welch discovered that a road orderly in Leyton had been told to spray weeds with only a pair of gloves as protection. Back at the depot, Mr Welch spoke to Mr J. Lynch, cleansing services manager, who said the spray was 'Rassapron'. It was, Mr Lynch said, totally safe and non-toxic. Protective clothing was not needed, you could bathe in the stuff.

Unconvinced, NUPE officers arranged a meeting for May 1: some of the dialogue is reproduced in the box below.

At the end of the meeting, the council said it was working out a code of practice. Meanwhile management pressed on with plans to start spraying.

May saw two branch members suspended without pay for refusing to spray the chemical, and a worker becoming sick after being in a vehicle containing Rassapron.

Then, on June 5th, a meeting finally took place of the Joint

Moment of truth at Low Hall Depot

Mr Collins, NUPE branch chair: Gentlemen, as you are the experts in this sort of thing, I would be very much obliged if you would answer three questions for me.

Question One — what is your opinion of a chemical called aminotriazole?

Mr Lynch, cleansing services manager: That is a poison, a very toxic one. We would not want to have anything to do with something like that.

Mr Collins: Question Two — what about atrazine?

Mr Lynch: I think we may have used that in the past, but not now. Rassapron has done away with all that sort of thing.

Mr Collins: Lastly, diuron?

Mr Lynch: That's another one that we would not touch with a barge pole. That's a very toxic poison. You can look anywhere you like in this depot: you won't find any of those in the place.

Mr Collins: Well, gentlemen, it may come as a bit of a surprise to you to know that Rassapron contains all three of those toxic poisons that you would not touch with a barge pole. Mr. Lynch, you have taught me a great deal.

Mr Gromland, safety officer (walks across the office, picks up a container of Rassapron, reads label): That's right, Jack, they are all here.

Mr Albert, NUPE branch secretary: I don't think any of you know what you are doing.

Works Committee, consisting of councillors and representatives of the manual unions. Information was provided by the Hazards Centre on the toxicity of the three chemicals in Rassapron. Pending a full investigation, the chemicals were with-

drawn. A week later, management confirmed that not just Rassapron but its three ingredients — aminotriazole, atrazine and diuron — were withdrawn. The advice from NUPE's local government national committee that members should not use

Pesticides conference unites campaigns

The Centre's *Pesticides Action Conference* in June attracted over 100 people, including local authority and civil service trade unionists, farm-workers, tenants and members of environmental groups.

Workshop discussions covered many areas including use of pesticides by local authorities, how to find out about pesticide hazards, the inadequacies of existing legal controls and the export of pesticides to the Third World.

The conference ended with a general pooling of ideas for future action. The London Hazards Centre is planning to set up a London Working Group to decide on campaigning priorities and to co-ordinate actions within London.

The Hazards Centre has produced a report summarising the ideas for action coming out of the conference. If you would like a copy, or are interested in being involved in the Working Group, please contact us.

2,4-D was based on "evidence to suggest that an increased risk of cancer tumours exists among workers exposed to herbicides like 2,4-D."

NUPE's circular, which contains a list of 34 trade-named pesticides known to contain the chemical, and a set of supporting documents, is available from the union at 20 Grand Depot Road, London SE18.

Birth defects

One of the most popular weedkillers used by local authorities has been found to cause birth defects in laboratory animals.

Last month the government ordered suppliers to stop selling the chemical ioxynil to nurseries and garden centres after the animal tests were reported by the main manufacturer, May & Baker. Supplies to farmers are to continue — with new labels!

We believe that ioxynil should have been withdrawn completely and that the government should apply the same policy to the many other pesticides which cause birth defects, including 2,4-D.

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The Doll Report: fatal errors

If someone tells you that your risk of death from living in a building with asbestos is less than one in 100,000, the chances are that they've been reading something called the Doll/Peto report.

Named after the two cancer researchers who produced it for the Health and Safety Commission, the report deals mainly with the cancer risk to workers. Doll and Peto show that a worker's life breathing the amount of dust currently permitted in industry will kill 1 in 100. They confirm that there is no safe limit.

Most of the report confirms what asbestos campaigners have been saying for years. But when it comes to dealing with the risk from asbestos in buildings the authors use a series of speculative assumptions to produce their dangerously misleading estimates that the community risk is only 1 in 100,000, or one death per year in the UK.

For the media and for conscious local authorities, this brief page of speculation is the Doll Peto report. With council officials quoting headlines like "Asbestos panic can stop" (Sunday Times 21 April 1985) tenants and other community activists need to know why the report has brought protests from the Hazards Centre, People's Asbestos Action Campaign, Shelter, trade unions, the Labour Research Department and many others committed to protecting public health.

These are the points where Doll and Peto went wrong in constructing their estimates:

- The figures they use are based on an exposure of 40 hours weekly, over 20 years. But tenants occupy their homes for up to 160 hours per week for a lifetime.
- Children are far more susceptible to carcinogens and are

more likely to 'disturb' asbestos during their normal play and activity at home and at school.

- Buildings contain not just white asbestos, as the report assumes, but also vast quantities of brown and blue asbestos.
- The problem of *peak exposures* is not addressed. These are doses occurring when asbestos is disturbed during DIY, decorating, moving furniture, children's play — normal living!

- The calculation of one death per 100,000 is based on the assumption that the average level of asbestos in buildings is 0.0005 fibres per millilitre of air.

Levels far in excess of these are found in buildings, even when asbestos-containing materials have not been disturbed.

Many of the cases we have been involved with over recent weeks involved levels of dust hundreds — even thousands — of times higher than those assumed by Doll/Peto. (See table)

'Safe' heaters: tenants win



On June 19 the tenants of Franklin Street in South Tottenham said goodbye to the last of their night storage heaters — and good riddance to the dangerous asbestos they contained.

There were no regrets as specialist contractors carried the empty casing of the Constor heater, wrapped in red plastic, out of the home of Les Wildman. In the back of the van it joined the red sacks containing 5½ hundredweight of storage blocks and the sheet of asbestos insulation which had been leaking fibres to the air for the best part of 20 years, along with a slow trickle of heat.

"We know what they did to our electricity bills, but what did they do to our health?" said Betty Sheridan.

"We had bills of £240 a quarter," said Muriel Clarke, "yet the houses were still so cold that when the contractors came to insulate the end walls they had to break the ice on the window to get it open."

Removal of the hated heaters was won by a long and persistent campaign, assisted by the Hazards Centre and Tottenham Law Centre. At first Haringey Council denied that there was any asbestos risk from the heat-

Mollory Rowland, Betty Sheridan and, right, new heating boiler.

ers. Then they proposed to remove them without special precautions as part of a heating contract. Finally, after protests from the tenants and their advisers, specialist contractors were hired to do the job properly using polythene tents and air locks and under close supervision of the environmental health department.

The tenants have good reason to fear asbestos. Betty Sheridan's uncle died at 52 after ten years in an asbestos factory.

Mollory Rowland lost her mother to asbestos. "All during the war she worked with the stuff, making gliders at the Critical factory in Ruislip Manor. She died 20 years later from asbestos disease. Nearly everyone who worked there has died."

Below: Les Wildman stands back as wrapped casing leaves.



Exposed! Our figures show the real risk

Asbestos levels found in the air of flats and schools — all readings in fibres per millilitre of air	
Location	Level
Lancaster West Estate, Kensington and Chelsea	
Flat with five kids, washing machine and bad vibration when door shuts	
Reading taken next to panels to ducting	
Reading No.1	0.04
Reading No.2	0.24
Holmefield Estate, Kensington and Chelsea	
Flat with warm air heating system and ducting to all rooms, unoccupied at time	
Bedrooms	0.02
Kitchen	0.01
Hall	0.03
Lounge, next to heater	1.03
Ferrier Estate, Greenwich	
Flats on a large ex-GLC estate with asbestolux panels next to front and rear doors. Air counts taken whilst simulated asbestos removal underway — i.e. banging door frame with hammer.	
Inside hall enclosure (moderate vibration)	0.3
Inside hall enclosure (strong banging)	1.6
Stairs (during vibration)	0.39
Acland Burghley School, North London	
Readings in disturbance test after rats had chewed panels	0.54
Storage heaters I — Health & Safety Commission	
Highest reading given in 1982 circular to local authorities	0.025
Storage heaters II — Southwark	
Readings taken by environmental health department during removal of heater	
Picking heater up and putting it down	0.02
Moving heater	0.04

Coming back from lunch to find newly unpacked visual display units sitting on your desks sounds like the opening scene of a union/management farce. But that's just what members of the Civil and Public Services' Association at Westminster unemployment benefit office found on June 14.

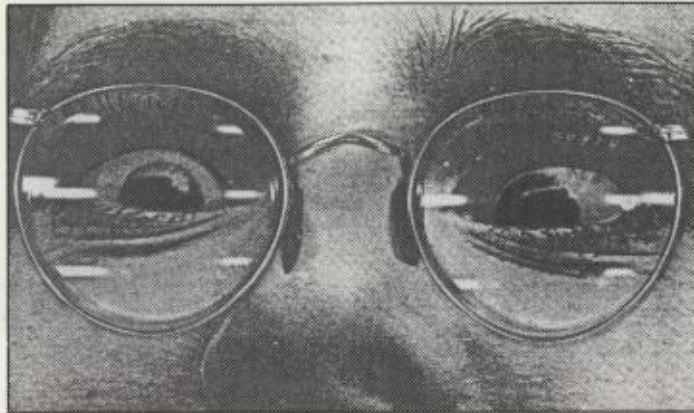
Staff at Westminster are involved in a pilot scheme for dole payments called the Terminal Replacement Enquiry Service (TRES) which was due to start this month at UB offices in Reading, Staines and Westminster.

With no local or national agreement reached on conditions of work with new technology, the local civil service management had nevertheless decided how they should "look after" the eyes of their employees. Appointments were made for the 57 CPSA members to have their eyes tested at an optician's around the corner from the office.

Only two per cent of people would need new lenses for VDU work, according to the management, and the first five people duly went off for their special VDU eye-test. But when four of these five were found to need corrective lenses, the management's figures seemed somewhat wide of the mark.

A union meeting was held and it was decided to press for a national agreement on new technology to cover procedures for eye-testing before anyone else visited the optician or went on training courses. Industrial action in support of a national agreement was being planned as the *Daily Hazard* went to press.

Screens test eyes



Eye and vision problems – burning eyes, aching eyes, difficulty focusing, blurred vision, grittiness in eyes, watery eyes – are the symptoms most commonly reported by people doing VDU work. A survey carried out by the Canadian Labour Congress showed that VDU workers experienced eye and vision problems twice as often as non-VDU workers. The problem gets worse if you spend more than four hours a day in front of a screen.

Why are eye problems so prevalent among VDU workers? A combination of different factors is involved, such as eye-muscle fatigue from having to focus at a fixed distance for long periods of time, reflection and glare from inadequate lighting and poorly-designed workstations, screen flicker, illegible characters, low humidity, and the build-up of static electricity around the unit and the operator.

Many unions now have guidelines on the sorts of condi-

tions that should be negotiated to minimise the risk of eye problems. They include.

- maximum of four hours a day on the VDU, with a 15-minute break away from the screen after every hour of continuous use;
- eye-testing by a person's own optician before VDUs are introduced and then at regular, yearly intervals in accordance with procedures laid down by the Association of Optical Practitioners (233 Blackfriars Road, London SE1);
- employers to pay for corrective lenses;
- proper design of workstations, lighting and ventilation following consultation with the union;
- job design in consultation with the union.

Skin problems?

We are working with several people who have developed skin complaints after operating VDUs. We suspect this problem is more widespread than is gen-

erally thought and would appreciate information from victims and others who have come across such complaints.

● An excellent new guide for people working with VDUs, "The Hazards of VDUs", is now available from Leeds Trade Union & Community Resource & Information Centre, 1st Floor, Market Buildings, Vicar Lane, Leeds. Price £2.00 plus 50p postage.

Smocks cover up VDU risks

As concern grows about the health hazards of VDUs one company is cashing in on women's fears about their reproductive health by marketing a special smock which they claim reduces the risk of radiation hazards and reassures operators that the employer has their welfare at heart.

The manufacturers of the 'Microshield' promise an added bonus: "productivity won't suffer either, as your operators won't spend time away from the VDU".

Unfortunately this miraculous device cannot protect operators against poor job design, dangerously uncomfortable workstations and office environments, stress, eyestrain and the painful, disabling injuries to muscles and tendons brought on by intensive use of VDU keyboards.

The metallised fabric cannot stop ionising radiation, such as X-rays, and whatever kind of rays it may be able to hinder, they'll still get through to your eyes and head.

One other thing before you let the boss rush out and buy these office aprons – we found that the fabric burns readily, emitting abundant and, we believe, toxic fumes.

Cancer dye

Chrysoidine, the bronze dye used on anglers' maggots, gives them three times the risk of getting cancer of the bladder and kidney according to the Cancer Studies Department at Birmingham University.

The dye is widely used in stains and polishes. It was the subject of one of the first inquiries dealt with by the Hazards Centre.

A substitute, bismark brown, may be just as dangerous.

Gas main workers challenge safety of 'foam-off' seals

For several years British Gas maintenance workers have been using a 'foam-off' kit to seal live mains. Workers became concerned about the health hazards of the foam and in October 1984 contacted the Hazards Centre.

We told them about the hazards of MDI (an isocyanate, similar to the one leaked at Bhopal) which can cause asthma, severe skin, throat and eye irritation, dermatitis and permanent lung damage.

The HSE (Health and Safety Executive) recently admitted that MDI is far more toxic than

they had previously thought and although British Gas' own scientists have measured MDI levels in excess of the new control limits during 'normal use' of the foam, they still insist the system is safe.

'No safe way'

Workers believe there is no safe way to use this substance; when injected into live mains, gas pressure can cause 'blow-backs' of the foam. Furthermore, using the foam in cold conditions will almost certainly lead to dangerously raised MDI concentrations.

Management have refused workers at Stratford Yard a written assurance that the 'foam-off' kit is safe. Numerous reports from union health and safety experts have indicated that the product is unsafe and should be replaced by alternatives such as methyl-methacrylate foam. Despite this, workers are being forced to use the foam or have their work passed to sub-contractors.

Any British Gas workers experiencing problems with 'foam-off' kits should contact the Hazards Centre.

Safety reps make law work

Safety reps in a North London factory have won wide-ranging workplace improvements after demanding their legal right to consultation on safety issues.

When reps from BOC Cryoplants approached the Hazards Centre in April it became clear that failure to resolve problems of noise, diesel exhaust and welding fumes in the workplace stemmed from safety reps being denied their basic legal rights.

Management had failed to operate an effective safety policy since the safety officer was made redundant two years ago. AUEW reps, concerned about the lack of consultation — the Safety Committee hadn't met for several months — contacted the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in December last year. A factory inspector visited BOC and was assured by the management that the situation would be remedied in line with requirements of the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977.

Despite management's assurance, nothing improved. The company did react — by introducing protective equipment — but without any attempt to consult the workers who would have to use it. Much of the equipment was found to be totally unsuitable and didn't tackle the problems caused by badly designed machinery and unsafe systems of work.

Workers were threatened with dismissal if they didn't accept the equipment.

The Hazards Centre advised

union reps that the management's attitude was unacceptable — by imposing these changes on the workforce they were ignoring their duty "... to consult safety representatives with a view to the making and maintenance of arrangements which will enable him and his employees to co-operate in promoting and developing measures to ensure the health and safety at work of the employees. . ." (Health &

Safety at Work Act 1974).

The safety reps reminded the HSE of this duty, but yet another accident occurred before the HSE admitted the reps had a point. Pressure on management led to monthly management/union Safety Committee meetings and fortnightly safety inspections.

Now the workers at BOC actively participate in all discussions relating to health, safety and welfare in their workplace.

Checklist of reps' rights

Any workplace with more than two employees, where a union is recognised, can appoint or elect as many safety reps as members decide are necessary to represent their interests on health and safety matters.

- **Inspections** Safety reps have the right (Regulation 6) to inspect the workplace at least once every three months — more often by negotiation or if there is a change in working conditions (e.g. introduction of new equipment or systems of work), a notifiable accident, disease or dangerous occurrence, or new official information on a hazard. By agreement, they can call in independent technical advisers.
- **Investigation** You can investigate hazards at almost any time between formal inspections (Reg 4).
- **Information** Regulation 7 requires management to make

information relating to health and safety available to safety reps. The Code of Practice (Para 6) lists the sorts of information that must be released — any documents on health and safety. The HSE is also required to make certain information available to reps (Section 28, HSWA 1974).

- **Training** All reps have a right to attend trade union-approved training courses (Reg 4). Get onto the TUC's ten-day course if you can. Details from Congress House.

- **Time off** Union safety business can be done in work time without loss of pay. The same applies to union training courses (Reg 4).

- **Facilities** The employer must provide adequate facilities for safety reps to function effectively (Reg 5). These include rooms for meetings; office equipment such as filing cabinets and desks; access to a private phone.



Centre news

A year ago the centre consisted of six desks in portakabin. Now it's a fully operational resource centre (in two portakabins!) During our first year we've dealt with more than 1,300 inquiries, been involved in numerous workplace and community campaigns, organised conferences around health and safety issues, prepared publications and started to set up a computerised databank of hazards information.

Huge demand

From the start we've been amazed by the demand for our services. We see this as a clear indication of the need for freely available information and organisational advice on hazards issues.

Seven workers

We've expanded from five to seven full-time workers. Chris Donovan and Tim Evans have recently joined Maggie Alexander, Alex Balsdon, Pat Kinnersly, Roslyn Perkins and Rory O'Neill in the collective.

Affiliations

We welcome affiliation from all groups concerned about health hazards. Affiliation shows your support for the centre and entitles you to receive the *Daily Hazard* as well as notice of the centre's other publications and activities.

Future funding

Like most GLC-funded organisations, our future finances are uncertain. By next year we may be relying on assistance from organisations, especially trade unions, which have the commitment and the resources to contribute to our finances. The centre provides an urgently-needed resource for groups fighting hazards and we'd welcome your help, in the form of donations or suggestions on ways to secure our future.

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

SPOT NEWS

● Belfast conference

Hazards Centre worker Roslyn Perkins was one of the contributors to the community asbestos conference held in Belfast on June 5.

The conference was organised by a coalition of groups, including the extremely active Divis Residents' Association. The Divis tenants have, through their own energy and with minimal funding, set up the Divis Environmental Health Project.

Although the long term ambition of all the tenants is to get the flats demolished and re-

placed by decent housing, the project aims to improve the environment in the short term.

In April, the London Hazards Centre, working with the Public Health Project, which is based at Shelter, prepared a report on environmental conditions on the Divis estate.

We found the flats unsuitable for the refurbishment planned by the Northern Ireland Housing Authority and reported that the flats were unfit due to damp, rubbish accumulation, infestations by rats cockroaches and other insects, asbestos, bad drainage and structural problems.

● Asbestos campaign

A major London-wide campaign was launched at the Londoners Against Asbestos Con-

ference held at County Hall on June 29.

The conference brought together for the first time trade unions, tenants' associations and community groups.

First priorities of the campaign are to make asbestos a major issue in next year's council elections and to highlight the failure of the Asbestos Licensing Regulations to ensure that all asbestos stripping is carried out in a responsible manner.

● Vauban clean-up

Tenant pressure has forced Croda to clean up its derelict site in Southwark (see *Daily Hazard* No. 3)

As we went to press there were rumours that the firm may develop half the site as a park.

Full story: next issue.