

THE DAILY HAZARD

Greenwich needs £4 million to remove Ferrier asbestos

Council slams door on killer dust

Living dangerously has acquired a new meaning on the Ferrier Estate in Greenwich. Tenants have been told that slamming the front door could be a hazard to health.

The danger comes from the panels of asbestos board surrounding the door. Banging and vibration causes the boards to release millions of asbestos fibres to the air. Breathing these fibres increases the risk of cancer.

The deadly fibres which escape from cracks at the edges of the panels are invisible to the naked eye. But tests commissioned by Greenwich Council have shown levels as high as 1.6 fibres per millilitre of air.



Ferrier Estate: tenants organise for safe removal of asbestos

This is eight times the level permitted in asbestos factories, 160 times the level which the GLC and most local authorities have set as the maximum for homes, schools and public buildings. It is also 3000 times the figure which the Doll/Peto report (see *Daily Hazard* No. 4) employed in calculations designed to show that the general public is not at risk from asbestos in buildings.

The Greenwich findings affect thousands of tenants in similar system-built estates where asbestos boards were used to partition up the concrete boxes formed by the heavy precast panels. Recently, the Greenwich tenants learned that there is little prospect of the risk being removed in the near future.

Council officials told the hundreds of angry tenants assembled in the estate's community hall that there was an urgent need to remove the panels but the council did not have the money. Greenwich has a current budget of £72,000 for the removal of asbestos. To deal with the Ferrier Estate alone

will cost four to five million pounds.

Tenants at the meeting were stunned to learn that the panels around the doors are not the only source of asbestos pollution in their homes. Environmental health officer Paul Cooney caused an uproar by announcing that tenants would know how to prevent risks from the rest of the asbestos.

To shouts of "What asbestos?", Mr Cooney explained that tenants had been sent a letter two years ago informing them of where asbestos was located. Many had not received the letter or had not registered its message. They had unwittingly drilled holes in the softer asbestos walls, removed the asbestos ducting or sandpapered the artex paints.

Ferrier Action Group has demanded total removal of asbestos, even if tenants have to be decanted for weeks while the work is done. So far, the council has not answered their demands. Instead it has taped over the cracks at the edges of the panels. Measurements have shown that even this activity releases so much dust that the workers need to wear masks. Families have not been evacuated and may stand watching the masked workers without protection.

Most estimates of the cancer risk from asbestos in the com-

munity are based on exposures of adults at work and ignore the fact that children are more vulnerable to cancer agents. A recent US study suggests that schoolchildren exposed at the present maximum level for community exposure (0.1 fibres per millilitre of air) may have a risk of three in a thousand of dying from the asbestos cancer, mesothelioma.

On the Ferrier estate children under five comprise a quarter of the population.



Damaged asbestos door surround

● A new report from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (AMA) estimates that 80 per cent of local authority housing estates and schools contain asbestos. The AMA puts the total cost of removing asbestos from homes, schools and other council properties at £1.5 billion.

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Danger! HSE advises on PCBs

Highly toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) have been heavily used in electrical equipment for decades. They are known to cause liver damage, blood and skin disorders, including the painful and disfiguring disease chloracne. There is considerable evidence that PCBs can cause cancer, particularly melanoma, a skin cancer.

Concern about the dangers of exposure has prompted the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to produce *Danger!*

PCB's The Facts, a leaflet advising workers how to handle PCBs safely. The leaflet is generally useful, but contains one very disturbing mistake: the HSE insists that heavy-duty polythene gloves should be worn to prevent skin contact. Tests have shown that PCBs can permeate a thick polythene glove in a couple of minutes and that wearing these gloves can actually increase skin contact by 'trapping' the chemical.

The Hazards Centre has ad-

vised several unions – and now the HSE – on suitable protective equipment for handling PCBs. Research shows that only Viton, a high performance polymer, offers sufficient resistance to PCBs. We recommend that only *fully trained and properly equipped* operatives should handle equipment suspected of containing PCBs.

The only satisfactory long-term solution to the PCB problem is the safe removal and disposal of *all* PCB materials.

The London Hazards Centre is GLC-funded



At Oxford Circus, bituminous asbestos tunnel linings fed the fire and contributed to the black smoke filling the station

Tunnel vision on asbestos

A year after fire filled Oxford Circus station with toxic fumes and deadly asbestos dust, London Regional Transport appears to have no strategy for dealing with the dangers revealed by its near-disaster of November 1984.

Nearly every station on the underground system has asbestos built into it somewhere, and most contain flammable materials. But the worst hazard is when the two risks combine in the material which fed the Oxford Circus fire – “black asbestos”.

This material is corrugated steel sheeting coated with a mixture of bitumen and asbestos. The bitumen burns with the irresistible ferocity which millions saw in the Bradford football stand inferno. The dense fumes, which could have claimed hundreds of casualties if fire had struck Oxford Circus in the rush hour, are laden with asbestos.

The London Fire Brigade is so concerned about the problem that it is now including all bitumen/asbestos installations on its Central Risks Register. LRT has agreed – “with some reluc-

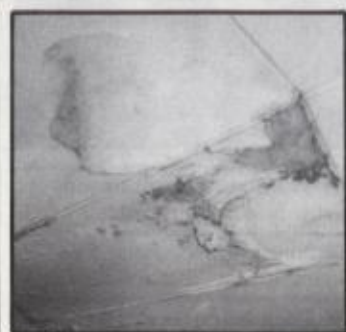
tance” according to an internal GLC memo – to notify all its locations to the brigade.

These locations are numerous. All stations on the Victoria Line have black asbestos sheeting under the plastic skin (itself a fire and fume risk) which lines the station tunnels. It has also been used extensively in station refurbishing on other lines.

So far, the fire-damaged tunnel at Oxford Circus is the only one where the material has been stripped out. When Green Park station was closed for a weekend in September, asbestos ceiling tiles were removed but bitumen asbestos sheeting above was left in place.

“Any material there that was considered dangerous would have been removed or made safe,” said LRT’s press office.

But at Oxford Circus, a section of bitumen asbestos in a passenger access tunnel has actually been covered up by a new false ceiling. And, as at many other stations on the underground, LRT’s costly programme of beautification is actually adding to the fire load. Plastic laminates replace ceramic



Asbestos ceiling tiles: flaking paint leaves surfaces exposed



“Black asbestos”—corrugated steel sheeting coated with bitumen and asbestos is being covered up by false ceilings at Oxford Circus station

SPOT NEWS

Prison sentence for dangerous asbestos removal

In September, the first-ever prison sentence under the Health and Safety at Work Act was given, by Snaresbrook Crown Court in east London.

Colin Sullivan, a property developer, failed to provide his workers with protective clothing during demolition of an asbestos-clad boiler. A factory inspector issued a prohibition order banning further work when he found asbestos lagging left out in the open and not in sealed containers.

But the prohibition notice was ignored and the boiler was demolished, increasing the workers’ chances of developing asbestos-related diseases such as the cancer mesothelioma.

Mr Sullivan was not imprisoned: his one-month sentence was suspended for two years. He was also fined £1,500.

Tower blocks and bugs

The London Hazards Centre’s Community Support Group held its first meeting on 9 October, when the National Tower Blocks Campaign showed a video and spoke about their campaign.

The Community Support Group welcomes members of tenants and community groups. The meetings aim to be educational as well as providing a forum for discussion, depending on the wishes of those who join.

So far, suggested topics are water contamination, asbestos, insect infestations, treatment of infestations by hazardous chemicals, noise and demolition. We hope to get “experts” as guest speakers who can talk about the issue in a down-to-earth way, and as a result produce basic fact sheets.

● Bring your own bugs!

The next meeting will be on Thursday 5 December, 7.30pm, South Bank Poly, Borough Road, SE1. Theme: *Bugs in the home and dangers of insecticides*.

Anyone is welcome including pest control workers. If you’d like to come contact Roslyn Perkins at the Hazards Centre.

Londoners Against Asbestos Campaign

“Asbestos and the Medical Profession”

Wednesday 13 November 1985 at 6.30pm
County Hall, South Bank, SE1

The meeting is open to all and will discuss why the medical profession has been slow to respond to the issue of asbestos. Doctors and a representative of the Society for the Prevention of Asbestosis and Industrial Diseases (SPAID) will speak.

tiles; moulded plastic boxes sealed with polyurethane foam and black mastic run the length of the platforms.

Even without black asbestos, LRT faces a multi-million pound problem:

● **Asbestos ceiling tiles** Found at most stations. Many show evidence of recent painting. Our picture shows that this does not seal these surfaces effectively, especially when damp penetrates the tiles. In many places tiles have been broken out of the support grid, leaving ragged debris attached to the fixing screws.

● **Laminate-coated insulation board** For example on the platform awnings of the Circle Line at Victoria, where some sheets

are warped and de-laminated.

● **Asbestos-based strawboard** On one of the ceilings at Embankment, the skin of this strange composite is peeling off.

● **Bituminous felt** Found behind a plastic lining at Holborn. Likely to be found elsewhere.

● **Asbestos cement** Used quite extensively for ceilings, but probably the least of LRT’s problems.

“We can’t answer detailed questions about what materials are where,” said the LRT press office. “We are doing a survey and liaising closely with the Fire Brigade. It will take some time for all the underground system, bearing in mind its size, but there will be a fairly detailed report – in a month or two.”

Management blunders are major cause of death

Workers have always been blamed for accidents occurring in the workplace, with management all too quick to accuse the victim of negligence or incompetence. However a recent study has shown that the blame for the majority of maintenance accidents lies fairly and squarely on managements' shoulders.

The study discovered that:

- 83 per cent of fatalities occurring during maintenance work could have been prevented had the legally required "reasonably practicable" precautions been taken.
- for 70 per cent of fatal accidents, "positive management action could have saved lives".
- management blunders were the major cause of 54 per cent of

the deaths, more than three times the corresponding figure for workers. Either way, it was always the worker who died.

These alarming statistics are revealed in reports by the Accident Prevention Advisory Unit of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The HSE reaches the obvious conclusion: management fails to recognise or chooses to ignore the dangers to workers.

Unfortunately the report offers no solutions; it merely serves to highlight managements' disregard for workers' welfare. The absence of recommendations is hardly surprising – the HSE is so woefully understaffed as a result of government cutbacks that it has become a to-

tally ineffective enforcement agency.

The number of factory inspectors in London has fallen by nearly 18 per cent in the past six years. Consequently the number of inspections has been massively reduced. The HSE's own report proves that managements often cannot be trusted to provide a safe working environment. A GLC survey reinforces the evidence; 60 per cent of London's construction firms do not even have a safety policy as required by law.

People will continue to be injured, maimed and killed at work until the government realises that its first duty is to protect employees' lives, not employers' profits.



The HSE's reports reveal facts about workplace accidents

HAPHAZARD

A teaspoonful too much for NUPE to swallow

When workers inquire about the hazards of the stuff they work with, a common response of the sales rep or the manager is to tell them that you can eat, drink or bathe in the product and come to no harm.

Often this general statement is followed by some specific quantity, usually precisely calculated, always prodigious – such as "3.76 gallons", or "5.3 sackfuls" or "bathe in it every day for a week".

Despite many requests from eager safety reps, it is rare to see anyone demonstrate the truth of these propositions. It may be they have read of the manager who dusted himself in a new pesticide and was itching all over within minutes and allergic to the stuff for ever after.

And there was the non-asbestos slate salesman who bit off more than he could swallow at a public meeting. And the technical rep who told the workers at a cable factory in Essex that his die lubricant was so safe you could fry food in it. When one of the lads produced a frying pan and a pound of sausages it turned out to be "not totally non-toxic".

They don't quite seem to have got the hang of it in Waltham Forest, where the officers are trying to reinstate the beloved herbicide Rassapron after the Council agreed with the local NUPE general branch that it

should be withdrawn (see *Daily Hazard* No. 4).

Their attempt to introduce an interesting new unit of toxicity – teaspoonsful of active ingredient per mile sprayed – or was it miles per teaspoon? – was marred by taking the volume of a teaspoon as 25 millilitres instead of the five millilitres used throughout the rest of the known world.

Being out by a factor of five turned out to be a trivial oversight when the safety wizards got on to scaling up the lethal dose from rodents to road operatives. Rassapron came out whiter than mother's milk. You'd have to drink 800 litres to get enough of just one of the three active ingredients to kill you.

Dave Collins, NUPE branch chair, was sure they'd got it wrong. Not being a scientist or a mathematician he couldn't quite believe what he found, but there it was: the calculation was based on a new variant of the metric system in which one millilitre was equivalent to one milligram, instead of the more usual gram. This upset the sums by a factor of one thousand. Rassapron seemed a thousand times safer.

All of which misses the point which NUPE and the Hazards Centre were trying to get across. It's not only the things that kill you that do you harm.

Black workers' hazards

Black workers are only too familiar with the way in which the combined effects of racism in education, housing, employment and even the trade union movement result in them being concentrated in the worst paid and most dangerous jobs.

Racism is not just a personal or institutional issue, it is deliberately used by the government and employers to divide the workforce and find scapegoats for the economic and social crisis.

The poor pay and conditions of black workers and women should indicate to other workers how easy it is for employers to disregard their basic rights. As the world-wide crisis deepens, employers will respond by demanding more redundancies and higher productivity – invariably resulting in an increased rate of accidents and occupational disease.

Employers are often only

concerned about health and safety when it affects productivity. Even left-wing councils like Lambeth, Liverpool and the GLC have been unable to safeguard their employees' jobs and conditions. So it's important that workers know about their right to a hazard-free working environment and that they organise to defend that right.

Since July, Chris Donovan has been working at the Hazards Centre to provide advice, information and support to other black workers concerned about, or organising around, health and safety issues, particularly blue-collar, migrant and home workers. A *Black People's Working Group*, which will guide and co-ordinate the Centre's work in these areas, is being set up. Anyone wanting to become involved should contact Chris Donovan at the Hazards Centre.

London Pesticides Action Group

Pesticides are increasingly being used in London's homes, parks, gardens, hospitals and other public places as a method of controlling unwanted insects, plants and moulds – and of cutting jobs. Because of the lack of information and policies on the use of these chemicals, a *London Pesticides Action Group* is being set up to gather information about pesticide usage in London.

Two meetings have now been

held, and the group's priorities include a newsletter to exchange information about the various Councils' practices, what pesticides are being used, problems that arise both for workers doing the spraying and for people whose homes are treated and details of campaigns on pesticide hazards.

If you would like to join the group, want more details, or have some information you'd like to pass on, please contact Frank Slight (convenor) 28 Summersby Road, Highgate, London N6.

Food: a recipe for ill health

Chemicals that may cause asthma attacks, skin reactions, allergies and cancer are handled every day by workers in the food industry. These chemicals are food additives and appear in almost everything we eat.

INGREDIENTS: Carbonated water, sugar, saccharin, caramel, phosphoric acid; acidity regulator E331, preservatives: E210 E220; caffeine

Work initiated and part-funded by the Hazards Centre has uncovered the risks posed by chemicals added to our food. These hazards have largely been overlooked to date – we naturally assume that a chemical is safe because it is allowed in food. Yet several additives banned in other countries on health grounds are still used in large quantities in Britain.

Often these chemicals have no nutritional value, but are added to make food production and retail more convenient for suppliers and manufacturers. Some are used for purely cosmetic reasons – to make the product more eye-catching. Others just add bulk, so actually replace food in our meals.

Food workers face a particular problem from these additives – double exposure, both as consumers and workers. The Hazards Centre has been contacted by a number of food workers, anxious about their exposures to additives. The more obvious effects of workplace exposures are problems such as skin irritation, dermatitis and asthma.

Women at a bottling plant developed severe skin irritation after mixing the powders added to a best-selling soft drink. The safety rep complained to the factory inspector. Shortly afterwards she was made redundant.

Crisp factory workers also suffer skin problems. A glance at the ingredients named on packets perhaps indicates why: other than potatoes, crisps contain virtually nothing recognisable as food – antioxidants, colours, flavours and flavour enhancers.

Union action has secured some improvements. Bakery workers suffered nose bleeds

when handling powdered calcium propionate, an additive used to prevent mould growth in bread. The Health and Safety Executive maintained there was no problem, because there are no known long-term health effects from exposure. But Nigel Bryson, health and safety officer with BFAWU (the Bakers' Union) considered the short-term effects quite bad enough and the union banned the use of the chemical by members.

Obviously, hazardous chemicals in our workplaces are undesirable and pressure is increasing for the use of unnecessary or hazardous additives to be banned. However, the Government's Food Advisory Committee (FAC) suffers from narrow representation and tends to give chemicals, not workers, the benefit of the doubt.

There are no workers' representatives on the FAC so the problem of workers' exposure to mixtures of food additives has been given scant attention.

INGREDIENTS: Starch, fat, salt, beef fat, yeast extract, wheatflour, colours: E102, E110, E123, E142, E150; emulsifiers: E472(e), E482; sodium aluminium silicate, monosodium glutamate, sodium inosinate, sodium guanylate; flavouring; antioxidants: E320, E321

Good food with no additives seems a long way off but would certainly prove a healthier recipe for food workers and consumers alike.

● The report by Melanie Miller is called *Danger! Additives at Work*. It costs £5 and is available from the London Food Commission, PO Box 291, London N5 1DU.

Tortuous tasks give typists teno



Three women were forced to leave their jobs in a solicitor's office when they developed a painfully debilitating disease of the tendons in their hands and wrists. The problems started two months after their jobs were changed from varied secretarial work using electric typewriters to all-day audio typing on electronic keyboards.

The women contacted Hillingdon Environmental Health Department which found that the employers were operating unsafe systems of work. An improvement notice was served, and the employers have now agreed to implement the recommended changes.

The disease the women suffer from is called tenosynovitis, which is a prescribed industrial disease. There are many similar diseases – repetition strain injuries – which can affect anyone

doing rapid, repetitive work for long periods of time.

The London Hazards Centre has recently produced a booklet on repetition strain injuries which includes information on the causes, who can be affected, recognition and treatment, prevention and compensation, and organising against RSI. The booklet is available from the Centre, and costs £2.00 for the labour movement and £5.00 to others.

Also of interest to users of VDUs will be a new information sheet *Reproductive Health and Visual Display Units: "Nickel Pinnies"*, price £0.50. In July's *Daily Hazard* we reported on the manufacturer's claims that these 'Microshield' smocks reduce the risk from radiation from VDUs. The information sheet explains why they may be worse than useless.

Videos for loan

We have several VHS videos which groups can borrow for meetings.

Workplace health & safety
Myth of the Careless Worker
20 min, 1983 (Australian)

Explains how careless managements, badly designed equipment and work methods – not workers – are often to blame for accidents and other damage to health.

Chemicals in the Workplace
22 min, 1983 (Australian)

How to find out about the hazards of chemicals at work; not just for chemical workers.

Bitter Wages 37 min, 1984

Made by the Women & Work Hazards Group. Excellent video covering hazards to women at work. Definitely for men too.

Repetitive Strain Injuries at Work 26 min, 1983 (Australian)

Good explanation of what RSI is, how it arises, and how to organise to minimise the risk.

Teno 12 min, 1984 (Australian)
Good on how tenosynovitis affects people's lives, but doesn't really explain what it is.

New technology

Technology at Work 30 min, 1983

Working Terms 23 min, 1984

These two videos show British workplaces where new technology has come in, and how workers responded – including some success stories.

New Technology Whose

Progress? Looks at the political and economic reasons why the pundits' leisure-society dream has become a workers' nightmare.

Asbestos

Dust to Dust: An Asbestos Documentary 26 min, 1984

Explains why asbestos is deadly and what people are doing (and the government isn't) about it.

Cheap, Cheerful and Deadly
56 min, 1984

Made by Hackney Teachers Association, this video describes the campaign to get asbestos out of Hackney's schools.

Annual Report

The London Hazards Centre was set up in 1984 to give information and help to workplace, tenants' and community groups organising to remove hazards from their environment. For a copy of the Centre's first annual report, contact:

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