

THE DAILY HAZARD

Disabled worker sacking "unfair"

On 18 January 1985 Yvonne Powell, who has suffered from multiple sclerosis for 13 years, was sacked from her job as a VDU operator. She had worked for Outset Office Services, an organisation that receives MSC subsidies to provide sheltered employment for severely disabled workers.

In April 1985, Yvonne contacted the Hazards Centre. She wanted to know whether the problems she had experienced with VDU work were due to incompetence, as Outset alleged, or the result of inadequate training, poor equipment and an uncaring management, as she suspected.

After hearing Yvonne's story the Hazards Centre agreed to assist Lewisham Council for Community Relations in representing her at an industrial tribunal hearing for unfair dismissal.

On 27 November 1985 the tribunal panel unanimously de-



cided that Yvonne had been unfairly dismissed and that Outset had "not measured up to the standard of fairness to be expected of an employer".

Brian Upright was office manager when Yvonne joined Outset in 1983 and, as he told the tribunal, Yvonne was "one of the best of the trainees". Yvonne described the atmosphere under Mr Upright as friendly and supportive.

Unfortunately, early in 1984 Mr Upright left. He was replaced by Geoffrey Waldron.

Yvonne's problems started when Outset took on the job of data processing the results of a survey, which involved transferring data from a form to the computer. Mr Waldron claimed that Yvonne was not capable of doing this work.

The tribunal heard criticism of the survey form from Claire-Marie Fortin, an occupational hygienist who often works with the Hazards Centre on VDU issues. Ms Fortin found that the form was "extremely bad because of its small type and con-

tained too much information".

Ms Fortin also told the tribunal that "a wheelchair, unless specially adapted, was not acceptable for a disabled person to work in for a long period because it could not be adjusted ... also a person's eyesight should be tested before doing VDU work". The employers had not consulted any health and safety specialists for advice on suitable office design for disabled workers operating VDUs.

Yvonne told the Hazards Centre that she was not given the opportunity at Outset to state her case. The tribunal agreed: the panel found that "it was necessary for the employers to do far more than they did to discover the true facts before dismissing the applicant".

When Yvonne first contacted the Hazards Centre she just wanted to establish the true facts and clear her name. Nearly a year after being sacked she has managed to do so.

Court victory opens way for cockroach compensation

Seven hundred tenants on an estate in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea stand to gain £500 each for the nuisance and inconvenience of having their flats crawling with cockroaches.

A wave of claims is expected to follow an important legal victory in October when two tenants on the Lancaster West estate, Thomas and Patricia Hudson, won damages of £500 against the council. The Hudsons were advised by the North Kensington Community Law Centre, which is now working with the tenants' association, distributing leaflets on the estate to make sure that other tenants are compensated for the period during 1982 and 1983 when council negligence al-

lowed the cockroaches to overrun their homes.

The prison-like estate was built mainly in the 1970s but its district heating system includes some old 1930s blocks. The warm ductwork for the pipes provided a perfect breeding ground for roaches and allowed them to move freely from flat to flat and block to block.

Cockroaches first moved onto the estate in 1979. The local authority followed its usual practice of dealing with the problem in a piecemeal fashion, treating individual flats and, in a half-hearted way, individual blocks. The infestation got worse until 1983 when the council finally called in a private contractor and the roaches were eradicated.

The pest control firm adopted a strategic plan for the operation which involved treatment of entire blocks, preliminary surveys, tenant education and consultation and leafletting.

The Hudson case is a useful precedent for any tenants who suffer persistent infestations by cockroaches or other pests. If the council, or other landlord, fails to take "due care" and "reasonable steps" to control the pests they will be open to a claim for negligence or nuisance.

The victory in Kensington and Chelsea should encourage tenants to organise together for effective pest control instead of accepting the myth that unhygienic individuals are to blame.

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Parents and NUT protect children from asbestos

Last November, Woodmansterne Primary School in Streatham was closed for a couple of weeks in the interests of "complete safety". Asbestos was stripped in a safe and responsible manner from the roof and dividing walls of a large, pre-1929 hut sited next to the infants' playground before the hut was demolished.

At a well-attended meeting on 14 October, ILEA representatives gave parents and teachers full details of how the work was to be done. Parents asked detailed questions on technical aspects of the removal, and were given full answers.

A success story of full consultation and participation by all concerned? Well, no, not exactly . . .

Several parents of children at the Woodmansterne school were aware that there is no safe level for asbestos exposure. When they raised the issue at a PTA meeting, asking for details of the proposed work and demanding that the school be closed, they were told they were creating panic and causing inconvenience. Why couldn't they accept assurances that the job would present a "minimal risk" to their children?

The parents weren't deterred. A petition was organised and signed by more than 150 people, the local press ran a story, and the London Hazards Centre was contacted. We were able to involve the National Union of Teachers via their staff-side rep on the ILEA/GLC Asbestos Joint Working Party

and ensure that Lambeth Environmental Health Department was aware of what was going on.

It was at the meeting of 14 October that the parents and teachers finally learned their demand for closure of the school was to be met.

At the present time, it is simply not known how much asbestos is present in London's schools, or what state it is in. Three years ago, ILEA formulated a good policy on asbestos which involved total removal of asbestos from all its 1,100 schools. Eighteen months ago, it said that a full survey of its 1500 properties would be completed within 12 months. So far, less than a third have been surveyed.

Even when surveys have



Three parents of children at the Woodmansterne School relax after hearing the school would close for asbestos stripping.

been done, they haven't always been thorough. At Southwold Primary School in Hackney, for instance, the Hazards Centre found boards containing brown asbestos in poor condition. These boards were not listed on ILEA's survey report.

● Union members concerned about asbestos in their schools should contact Eddie Rowe, staff-side rep on the ILEA/GLC Asbestos Joint Working Party. Tel: 01-633 5881.

Asbestos tower of Hackney

Just five days before the big bang that was to herald the birth of the leaning tower of Hackney, the London Hazards Centre received a flurry of phone calls from worried local residents: "What about the asbestos?" Community rumours were rife that Northaird Point on Hackney's Trowbridge Estate was still stuffed with asbestos.

We contacted Hackney Council, and for two days were given solid assurances that there was no problem. Then the truth emerged - some 80 panels of brown asbestos had been overlooked. Council officers assured us that, despite the fact that the building was by now missing floors and being charged up for

the big demolition day, the contractors were removing the asbestos.

So, what about the Trowbridge Estate's other seven doomed blocks which, according to Hackney's environmental health department, are of the same design and likely to have similar locations of asbestos? Tenants in these blocks had apparently not been informed about the asbestos in their homes.

Tenants in Hackney who are involved with the London Asbestos Action Campaign (LAAC) are trying to make sure that the Trowbridge tenants are warned so that they can take the matter up with the Council and avoid unnecessary contact with asbestos in the future. The blocks are due for demolition, but asbestos fibres released during even one DIY job could be a lethal dose.

Bugs meeting in February

The Hazards Centre's Community Support Group will next meet on 20 February 1986 to discuss "Infestations and What Treatments to Demand".

The Community Support Group, like our other working groups on trade unions, information, ethnic minorities and women, is multi-purpose. The central aim is to involve people in the running of the Centre.

Those attending the last Community Support Group meeting in December agreed

that organisations and groups should be encouraged to send a delegate (the same person needn't come each time), not just to hear speakers but also to help guide our activities.

So, if you are using us for information, or are interested, please get someone to come from your group. Contact the Hazards Centre for the time and place of the February meeting - particularly if you have problems with ants, cockroaches, rats . . .

"Demolish our estate", say Belfast tenants

In November, tenants from Belfast's Divis estate held an exhibition called *Demolish Divis - the dreadful enclosure* in splendid Georgian rooms, a mere stone's throw away from Buckingham Palace. The exhibition was hosted and backed by the Town and Country Planning Association. Contributions of money and help were received from a wide variety of sources including MPs and trade unions.

Fifteen members of the Divis Residents' Association travelled to London to put their case for demolition. The exhibition included a panel on "hazards" which the Hazards Centre helped design, covering asbes-

tos, dampness, infestations, sewage and waste disposal. The exhibition booklet explained very clearly why refurbishment will not solve Divis' problems, and put forward the tenants' demands for traditional housing to be built on the cleared site. They want to be involved in all stages of decision making with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

This vivid exhibition and booklets are available for hire. Please contact Brian Ansom at TCPA, 17 Carlton Terrace, London SW1 for further details. Donations towards the massive cost of mounting the exhibition will be gratefully received.



Cockroaches trapped by tenants from the Divis Estate in Belfast on display at an exhibition which they mounted in London.

Tenants' tests reveal hazards in water supply

Fed up with waiting for the council to deal with their complaints about polluted water supplies, tenants in Tower Hamlets commissioned a microbiologist to help them survey several estates and teach them how to do their own tests for contamination.

Dave Wheeler, a microbiologist from the University of Surrey, and Jane Cowan, a member of the executive of the Tower Hamlets Tenants' Federation spent a day surveying housing estates. Among the simple test-kits they used was the Paqualab developed at Surrey for use in the field by ordinary people.

They investigated contamination from two main sources: the mains supply provided by the water authority and the storage, plumbing and drainage systems within the buildings. By the end of the day they had

found real causes for concern in both areas.

On the estates. This is what the surveys found:

- Water tanks on roofs open to contamination, with poor maintenance and security, asbestos-cement construction, lack of protection against pollution by rats, pigeons and other impurities.

- Drainage systems: poor design and maintenance leading to sewage "backsurge" into baths and kitchen sinks. (In the Lewey House tower a pregnant woman's bath filled with sewage while she was in it.)

Tests of the chlorine content of water at kitchen taps showed that it had been almost totally used up by dealing with organic matter in the supply.

The mains supply. The most serious hazard found here was from nitrites. Results from a simple test-kit indicated that this group of chemicals was well above the limit set by the EEC. Thames Water Authority has a "derogation" allowing it to exceed the limit. In a letter to the Tower Hamlets Health Campaign it has admitted that its own water-treatment practice – using the disinfectant chloramine – has caused the nitrite problem.

The DoE should not have permitted Thames to get away with this; derogations are allowed only for exceptional meteorological or geological conditions.

The amount of nitrite in our water supply is not just a technicality. Nitrites cause cancer of the digestive system.

By taking the science into their own hands, tenants in Tower Hamlets have begun to generate the public awareness and confidence needed if the council and the water authority are to comply with their duty to provide a supply of clean and wholesome water.

● Further details from:

Tower Hamlets Health Campaign, St Margaret's House, 21 Old Ford Street, London E2

Tower Hamlets Tenants' Federation, Oxford House, Derbyshire Street, London E2.



A tenant in Tower Hamlets uses a simple kit to test the water.

Pesticides bulletin

The first newsletter from the *London Pesticides Action Group* is now available. One of the main purposes of the Group is to gather as much information as possible about pesticide usage in London, from tenants' experiences of having their homes sprayed to Councils' policies on pest control.

News of Lambeth Council's new policy on pesticide use is a main feature of the first issue of the *Pesticides Action Bulletin*. Lambeth has recently agreed that it will constantly review the pesticides it uses, try to select the safest chemical for the job in hand, inform tenants and the public about chemicals used in homes and public places, and give warnings about safety precautions that need to be taken when pesticides are used.

The *London Pesticides Action Group* would like to hear of any experiences or information people have on pesticides, including local campaigns. If you have some news, or wish to receive the *Bulletin*, please contact Frank Slight, 28 Summersby Road, Highgate, N6.

Gamma-ray plan for food is frozen

In the May 1985 issue we reported that a Government advisory committee was expected to recommend lifting the ban on the use of ionising radiation to preserve food.

The Hazards Centre has since been involved in a campaign to stop the introduction of a process that can reduce the nutritional value of food and must expose workers to the risks of gamma radiation.

This campaign, together with the publication of *Food Irradiation in Britain?* by the London Food Commission, has been successful in causing a waning of interest in the food industry, and a government moratorium on lifting the ban.

The Hazards Centre is par-

ticularly worried about the dangers for food processing workers. They could receive small doses of harmful radiation throughout the working day. Maintenance work or accidents could produce massive exposures.

There is no safe level of exposure to radiation; workers would be at risk from cancer.

Hopefully, continuing public concern will lead to a permanent ban on food irradiation – the only healthy solution for both food workers and consumers.

- *Food Irradiation in Britain?* is available from the London Food Commission, PO Box 291, London N5. Price £2.50.

HAPHAZARD

How to kill a water buffalo

A chief environmental health officer (EHO) was having grave difficulty locating supplies of chlordecone, a chemical he was reliably informed would rid his district of ant infestations and provide the answer to all his problems. What his sources failed to tell him was that Kepone – the trade name of chlordecone – doesn't stop at insects but has also seen off animals as large as water buffalo.

Workers exposed to Kepone suffered sterility, weight loss, liver disease and blood and nervous disorders. The Hazards Centre informed the EHO that the chemical was not approved for use in Britain.

We feel that environmental health departments should be a smidgin more critical before recommending pesticides that might remedy infestations but threaten the health of pest control operatives, tenants and water buffalo alike.

Tenants square up to council

In the last issue we reported the heroic efforts of Waltham Forest Council to introduce a radical new unit of measurement, the megaspoon. Not to be outdone, Wandsworth Council recently introduced its own new, exciting (but not very scientific) unit.

Airborne asbestos fibre levels are measured by sampling the number of fibres in a given volume of air – the results are normally expressed in fibres per millilitre (f/ml). This is the same as fibres per cubic centimetre (f/cc or f/cm³) but not the same as Wandsworth's preferred "fibres per metre squared" – which introduces the wholly new concept of the two-dimensional volume.

At a recent meeting with Sudbury House tenants this innovation cropped up in conversation, much to the embarrassment of the council officials present, who had previously boasted that tenants should leave the complex, technical business in the Council's highly trained and competent hands. Tenants thought the Council's gaffe spoke volumes about their competence and decided that full consultation on all improvement work was preferable.

Telecom tightens gas code

British Telecom maintenance engineers, worried about the hazards of exposure to the chemicals they worked with, expressed their fears to management, only to be told that the chemicals posed no threat to health.

But workers' symptoms were real enough – dermatitis, eye injuries, dizziness and narcosis – so National Communications Union (NCU) branch health and safety officer Ian Pike asked the Hazards Centre for a second opinion.

The Hazards Centre advised the NCU that neither the chemicals nor the systems of work used were safe, and that exposure to the chemicals was al-

most certainly responsible for the workers' symptoms.

The engineers were involved in the maintenance of air conditioning refrigeration systems in BT properties. These systems contain chemicals known as freons (or chlorofluorocarbons), which can cause many problems including heart and lung conditions, dermatitis, frostbite and possibly cancer.

Furthermore, there is no smell to warn of the presence of freons and, as freons are four times heavier than air, dangerously high concentrations quickly build up at floor level. Welding or brazing can cause the chemicals to decompose to toxic acid fumes and hazardous

organic compounds, including the war-gas, phosgene.

Deaths from exposure to freons were reported as early as the 1930s, and the particular risks for refrigeration engineers have been known for more than 30 years. In 1952 a worker who died from freon poisoning had been doing exactly the same job as the NCU workers are doing today.

When management were told about the workers' concerns they produced analysts' reports showing that levels of the chemicals were within the recommended standards. The tests were done on systems that were working correctly.

Unfortunately, maintenance

engineers normally worked on non-functioning systems which were most likely to be leaking freons. New, more realistic, tests were done that revealed levels of freons up to five times the Health and Safety Executive's recommended standard of 1,000 parts per million (ppm). Even the lowest figure measured in the new tests was well in excess of this level, at 1,500ppm.

Fortunately, union pressure and the Hazards Centre's advice led to the introduction of safer systems of work, in line with the EEC's Code of Good Practice for the use of freons in refrigeration and air conditioning applications.

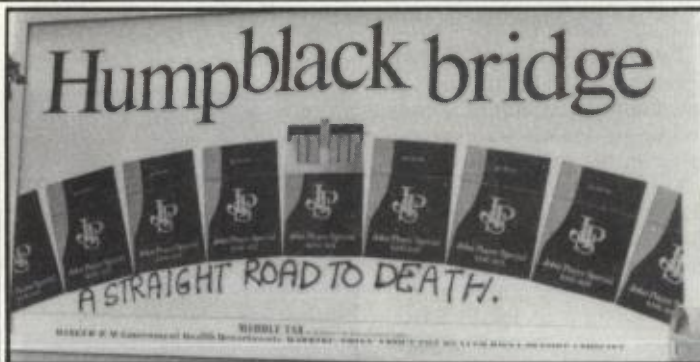
VDU SURVEY: "major health concern"

There is no lack of information on the hazards of working with visual display units if you only ask the right people – the workers using them. The results of two surveys on workers' experiences with VDUs have recently been published.

Health and Safety at Work magazine got nearly 4,000 replies to a questionnaire on eye problems, muscle pain, hand problems, fatigue, irritability, stomach pains and skin rash. It concluded: "the consistency and regularity of the incidence of a wide variety of symptoms associated with prolonged VDU use constitutes a major health concern for workers and employees, and for those in authority concerned with the long-term well-being of the working population".

The second survey comes from Labour Research Department. Their new booklet about effects of VDUs on health and on job security and quality summarises 206 questionnaire replies from trade unionists and suggests ways of dealing with the problems people are reporting. There's a lot of practical information on sources of more detailed advice and on suppliers of decent equipment.

Both surveys depended on trade unions for distribution, and didn't get into unorganised workplaces. City Centre, an ad-



Warning: racism harms health

In 1952 Doll and Hill published a paper linking lung cancer with smoking. It took nearly 30 years for cigarettes to carry any sort of health warning, and lung cancer still kills 37,000 people every year. It's taking even longer for it to be accepted that work and bad housing can "seriously damage your health".

The worst hazards are faced by blue-collar and manual workers, and by tenants in inner London high-rise, system-built and pre-war properties. Black Londoners have their problems compounded by racism from employers, council and government officials.

The *Black and Ethnic Minorities Working Group* at the London Hazards Centre is

vice and resource centre for office workers in central London, holds meetings where non-unionised office workers in London can meet and talk. And they have recently helped to launch a national VDU Workers' Rights Campaign to press for legislation on standards.

● *VDUs, Health and Jobs*, £1.10 from the Hazards Centre

investigating the health effects of bad housing, and intends to produce information sheets advising tenants in their own language on how to deal with their problems.

The Hazards Centre can provide information on the hazards of, for example, glues and solvents used by immigrant homeworkers, their rights to join unions, and rights under the Health and Safety at Work Act. But we need help to decide on our first priorities, help with translations, and help with the production of leaflets.

If you have an interest in race and health, please contact Chris Donovan at the Hazards Centre.

or Labour Research Department, 78 Blackfriars Road, SE1.

● City Centre, 32/35 Featherstone Street, EC1. Tel: 01-603 1338.

● *Health and Safety at Work*, November and December 1985, £2.00 each. PO Box 109, McLaren House, 19 Scarbrook Road, Croydon CR9 1QH.

Help!

Funding crisis

It goes without saying that the demise of the GLC will affect services provided by the London Hazards Centre. At present, we are able to meet most requests for help, even if it means dropping everything to try to get information to people before – or during – vital meetings with management or the Council.

In our first 18 months of operation, we have been able to help literally thousands of Londoners trying to improve their working or living conditions. We'd like to continue doing so. But we need your help.

Resolutions

So, please take the time to read the leaflet enclosed with this issue of the *Daily Hazard*, amend the "model resolution" so that it suits your organisation, and put it on the agenda for the next meeting. The knowledge that we have commitments to funding via standing orders will help us to plan our future services.

Phone the Hazards Centre on 01-261 9558 for more information or copies of the leaflet.

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