

THE DAILY HAZARD

London schools asbestos plan – too slow, too many mistakes

Trade union vigilance backed by advice from the London Hazards Centre has uncovered the truth about asbestos in schools – any asbestos is a deadly threat.

Recent cases in London schools have destroyed the dangerous myths about two kinds of asbestos material and have called into question the competence of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA).

Myth No.1: lagging. ILEA has long maintained that asbestos "lagging" (insulation), if undisturbed, presents no threat to health. Unfortunately, this is untrue. Far from requiring a deliberate action to release any asbestos fibres from lagging, it needs only the ordinary natural flow of air over insulation materials to produce contamination of the surrounding area. This was clearly demonstrated at **Hague Primary School** (see *Catalogue of Disasters* on page 2).

Myth No.2: asbestos cement. Asbestos cement is also supposed to have a magical ability to

At the present rate of spending – £7 million a year – ILEA will take the best part of 50 years to make safe – or bodge up – all its schools from asbestos hazards.

Even this schedule, which condemns generations of children to breathe asbestos dust, may now be under threat. An ILEA plan to put asbestos removal into its "capital" budget – as though it were new building work – lays it open to Government cuts. The established practice of treating the programme as a "revenue" item, like repairs and decoration, helped to shield it from cuts.

Last year ILEA's total capital budget was halved to a paltry £16 million.

hold in asbestos fibres. In fact, normal use of a building can lead to the release of asbestos fibres.

At **Acland Burghley School** (see *Catalogue of Disasters*), mice gnawing at asbestos panels produced fibre levels a staggering 50 times ILEA's "action level". Most asbestos boards occur as wall or door panels where they are easily disturbed.

Obviously, ripping out the asbestos without proper safety procedures is no answer. But a safe system of work, monitored by independent experts, could

be. This is a problem at the moment as ILEA has a confidence in its "medical advisers" that is not shared by many union safety reps in schools.

"It's worrying that medical advisers invariably support management", said Eddie Rowe, staff-side co-ordinator of ILEA's Asbestos Working Party.

Hague Primary and Acland Burghley are just two of the schools where ILEA's programme went dangerously wrong. Our *Catalogue of Disasters* on page 2 lists some more.

Centre gets funds and new office

It used to be a joke amongst London Hazards Centre workers that if any other group was to contact us saying that they worked in a Portakabin with hardly enough room to swing a cat, with poor ventilation, fluorescent lighting, continual vibration and noise from passing traffic and overhead trains, and a five-minute trek to the loo, we would tell them to walk out until improvements had been made.

Happily, life in two Portakabins in a car park is now over for the Centre's seven collective workers: since the end of June we've been installed in new offices in the Transport and General Workers' Union building at King's Cross. At last we feel we have space to breathe in.

In fact, June 1986 saw good moves for the Hazards Centre in more ways than one. On June 10, at the first meeting held by the London Boroughs Grants Committee (the "Richmond Scheme") since the local government elections, we heard that the London Hazards Centre would be receiving a full year's funding to the end of March.

A week after moving into Headland House we closed the 'phone lines (again!) for the collective and some of the management council to do training on making the Centre more relevant and accessible to Black and "ethnic minority" Londoners. It was an exhausting, emotional and very positive three days that has given us a clearer sense of purpose and direction.

What with the move, training and uncertainties over funding following the abolition of the GLC, our service to trade union and community groups has inevitably suffered. So, many thanks to everyone for bearing with us.

Job-sharer wanted – see page 4

Pesticides: Islington bans 27 – and the talks go on

Trade union action against pesticide hazards in London's parks, streets and open spaces has moved into a new phase. After the wave of blackings which followed publication last summer of trade union and Hazards Centre information on individual chemicals (see *Daily Hazard* No.4 and No.7), the more enlightened councils have accepted that they must work with the unions on comprehensive policies for the safe selection, use, storage and disposal of all pesticides.

Islington. Parks management and unions have regular meetings at which chemicals are the only item on the agenda. A comprehensive draft policy presented by the union side provides the framework for negotiations.

In a preliminary statement of intent the council has recognised that "all chemicals are potentially hazardous and the number of approved chemicals should, therefore, be kept to a minimum".

At a meeting in June, 27 out of the 82 brand name chemicals listed as being used in Islington were moved into the "banned" category. They include products containing the weedkillers 2,4-D, aminotriazole, atrazine, diuron and ioxynil.

Haringey. NUPE and TGWU members are moving towards a united strategy. Negotiations should produce a comprehensive policy on pesticides. A joint working party with parks management has begun to work through the borough's register of chemicals.

At a meeting in July several suspect materials identified by the Hazards Centre were struck off the list.

INSIDE

Dump threat spurs shires to action



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Danger dumps put Home Counties in the front line

As London's hazardous waste tips brim over, the gravel-pitted Home Counties are finding themselves in the front line of the fight against asbestos.

In July we received two calls for help from residents in different areas of Hertfordshire and one from Harefield in the London Borough of Hillingdon. All three communities were under threat from the same 100,000 tonnes of asbestos-contaminated waste from an old Cape factory in Rickmansworth, Herts. Closed in 1984 due to public resistance to its cancer-causing product, the factory left a buried legacy believed to be 30ft deep and heavily contaminated with blue asbestos.

Cleanaway

The new owners have employed a variety of contractors to clear the site for a new factory and to dispose of the waste. One of the main companies is Cleanaway which operates the Broxbournebury Park Quarry between Broxbourne and Hoddesdon.

In February this year Herts County Council modified an ordinary waste licence under the Control of Pollution Act 1974 to enable Cleanaway to take the Cape waste. Other relaxations of the licence included permission to switch from sealed skips to tarpaulin-covered tipper lorries, and to bring in blue asbestos in any form from other locations. These changes were not submitted to planning committee, councillors or the general public.

Residents in all three areas, Rickmansworth, Broxbourne and Harefield – another potential target for Cape's leavings – are fighting to stop further dangerous haulage across built-up areas of the Home Counties. In July, a worker from the London Hazards Centre spoke at a meeting of 700 residents in Broxbourne. Herts County Council refused to take action despite evidence of breaches of licensing conditions. The meeting was unanimous in its demand for the immediate revocation of the licence and passed a vote of no confidence in the council's deal-



Local paper shows anger

ings in the matter.

The lawyers for Cleanaway stepped in with an offer to stop dumping pending further investigation. The council wants this investigation to be "internal". Local residents want a public enquiry.

The residents of all three areas would like to see the waste made safe on site at Rickmansworth. The Hazards Centre advised them that there are other ways to deal with the waste, including vitrification and sealing it in concrete. It remains to be seen whether the anger in local communities can force councils and business interests to adopt these more expensive solutions.

Cancer dust toll claims children

Figures released by the Health and Safety Executive last month show that more than 2,000 people were killed by the asbestos cancer mesothelioma in the past six years.

The youngest victim was eight years old. Ten were under 24 when they died. The annual death toll from asbestos cancer is expected to rise until the year 2000.

Research on animals has shown that many other fibres, including all those developed as substitutes for asbestos, cause the same cancer when injected into the chest cavity.

LAAC news

London Asbestos Action Campaign (LAAC) has won a further year's funding for its part-time campaign worker, Maire Pytharas. The new funding was agreed in June by the London Boroughs Grants Committee.

The "I Spy Asbestos" campaign which began in late spring is centred on an "I Spy" pack which contains forms for reporting asbestos sightings, leaflets, stickers, posters, press release forms and the LAAC manifesto.

"I Spy" packs are available from London Asbestos Campaign at the LHC. A donation of £1.00 is requested to cover costs, cheques or postal orders payable to LAAC.

For further information write to: London Asbestos Action Campaign which is based at the London Hazards Centre, or telephone 01-833 2487.

PAAC lobby

On May 21 campaign groups from all over the country met at Westminster to lobby their MPs on asbestos issues and to inform each other of their campaigns. The People's Asbestos Action Campaign asked MPs to press for:

- a complete ban on all further import and use of asbestos;
- government funding to deal with the legacy of more than 5 million tonnes of asbestos already used in the UK.
- complete review of the system of medical assessment and granting of compensation, in consultation with representatives of the victims of asbestos diseases.
- more legal control over asbestos related work, particularly the removal and dumping of asbestos wastes.

SCHOOLS ASBESTOS Catalogue of disasters

Malmesbury Primary Tower Hamlets

Contractor changed at last moment in a cost-cutting exercise. Safe system of work ignored, resulting in "gross contamination" when staff and pupils returned. Waste asbestos stored in unlocked van which was subsequently stolen.

Hague Primary Tower Hamlets

ILEA found badly damaged asbestos lagging in the basement but refused to take appropriate action. NUT pressure forced air tests which revealed airborne contamination three times ILEA's action level. ILEA ignored its policy to remove damaged lagging material, failed to consult staff and recommended "safe" sealing of the area containing the asbestos. The seal failed in two days, giving rise to asbestos concentrations up to 32 times the ILEA action level in the occupied nursery overhead.



'Pitted' board at Southwold

Southwold Primary Hackney

Survey incompetent: smashed board (see picture) described as having "pitted surface". Some asbestos missed – even though survey report was the size of a telephone directory. Staff working in a demountable with walls and ceiling of asbestos (some damaged) not told of hazard and assumed survey found the panels were safe.

Colveston Primary Hackney

1983 survey said "all lagging to be removed". Most still present as we went to press. Asbestos debris from boiler-room insulation removal still lying on the floor of the room three years later.

Asbestos lagging in boxing gym and in youth centre described as "non-asbestos" in original survey.

Damaged asbestos lagging directly under a gym described as "safe and undamaged".

The asbestos had not been disturbed – fibres had been carried by normal air movement.

Acland Burghley Camden

"Safe" asbestos boards were source of asbestos contamination at over 50 times ILEA's "action level".

Barnard Park Nursery Islington

Asbestos debris contaminated children's toys on poorly supervised removal job.

Short-life housing

Filling the Empties



This excellent book produced by Empty Property Unit deals with *short-life housing*. Much of the book is concerned with the practicalities of gaining licences for

the use of empty property for designated periods of time. It has a very instructive chapter on standards for health and safety in housing with an up-to-date interpretation of public health and housing legislation. Unfit housing is frequently found in this area and the book looks in detail at what standards should be enforced, with back-up check lists.

PLUGS

The book points out that short-life housing is no substitute for permanent, properly maintained public housing and is particularly unsuitable for the elderly and unfit and for families with children. An appendix on asbestos, researched by the London Hazards Centre, gives good basic advice to housing associations and co-ops on how to deal with asbestos.

Filling the Empties: £5.95 from Shelter, 157 Waterloo Road, London SE1.

Demolition

Resisting the Wreckers

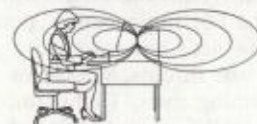
If you are fighting against demolition of buildings or felling of trees you are likely to find your legal rights to protest are weak. Planning consent can often be given without public knowledge or discussion. This short pamphlet concentrates on ways of making the labyrinth of laws and regulations work in your favour when fighting a community campaign on demolition. An appendix on asbestos and demolition written by the London Hazards Centre is included.

Resisting the Wreckers £1.00, available from London Planning Aid Service, 17 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1 or from The Community Rights Project, 157 Waterloo Road, London SE1.

VDU radiation

Terminal Shock

If you want to know all there is to know about radiation emitted from visual display units (VDUs), then you'll find a very clear explanation in Bob DeMatteo's book *Terminal Shock: The Health Hazards of Video Display Terminals*. You'll also find out how little work has been done to identify the health effects of exposure to low levels of "non-ionising" radiation from VDUs – microwaves, radiofrequencies, very low and extremely low frequencies (VLF and ELF).



Bob DeMatteo is employed by the Ontario Public Service Employees' Union of Canada, and has for years been collecting data on the health hazards of work with computer technology, particularly radiation hazards.

In this book he explains what electromagnetic radiation is, why it is emitted from VDUs, and why emissions are difficult to measure. The known and suspected health effects of the different frequencies are described, and the levels of exposure considered "safe" by government bodies (particularly in the West) are questioned. There is also a practical section on how the radiation hazard from VDUs can be controlled, with advice on shielding the screen and the terminal case.

The title of the book is, however, somewhat misleading, since it is really only the health hazards of radiation from VDUs that are covered in depth. The book ends with chapters on other factors causing ill health, such as stress, poor job design, and the ergonomic problems that can lead to eye complaints and musculoskeletal injuries. But these chapters don't add much to the wealth of information already available on what trade unionists should be negotiating for to improve the whole workplace environment.

Terminal Shock is available from "Turnaround", 27 Horsell Road, London N5 (Tel: 01-609 7836). Price £5.95 plus 75p post and packing.

Farm has city hazards

Broadwater Farm estate in Tottenham is similar to the Ferrier Estate in Greenwich (see *Daily Hazard* Nos. 5 and 8) – an early 70s, deck-access, system-built maze of concrete blocks.

Shortly after the uprising of October 6, the Hazards Centre despatched a worker to Haringey to talk to Rupert Downing, one of the estate's community workers and a NALGO shop steward, to find out what are the hazards of the Farm.

Rupert told us: "Yes, we know we've got a major asbestos problem on the estate, and water penetration, design faults, poor walkway lighting, etc. But our main problem at the moment is 50 per cent unemployment, and living under a state of police siege".

In late July we asked Rupert how things were now on the Farm. "We've had a lot of structural work done, false ceilings and asbestos removal, but the police are still here with their Operational Command Vehicle, a helicopter... and sledge-hammers. Unemployment's worse and the design faults have led to a cockroach infestation".

While "experts" and local Tories demand that the estate

be demolished – a demand that tenants on the Divis Estate in Belfast (see *Daily Hazard* Nos. 3 and 6) have successfully won – the 3,000 residents of Broadwater Farm feel differently: "We're here to stay, and here to fight for improvements".

Meanwhile, thinking of the Ferrier Estate – where just slamming a door liberates asbestos – we're wondering how many deadly fibres are released by sledge-hammering through 100 doors...

HAPHAZARD

Droning on

Noises were recently made in the House of Commons by a Tory MP. The Hansard transcription of these noises seems to imply that the poor chap was a little put out by the persistent droning of airships over London – presumably Westminster and Chelsea in particular.

We rang the (ex-GLC) Noiseline on 633 3001 to ask what sorts of aircraft noise get reported most often. "The main sources are airships, jets and helicopters", said the Noiseline spokesperson.

One group more exposed to Central London aircraft noise than most is the non-stop picket outside South Africa House.

We asked one what she thought.

"Oh yes", she said, "the airships do drone on a bit, but they brighten up the sky. It's the police helicopters at 500 feet that are the worst."

Our Noiseline spokesperson said that noise from the police chopper unit is outside their jurisdiction. We say bring back the GLC.

Postbox bugged in solidarity



The notice says: "Temporarily closed due to infestation by insects". Postal staff were being plagued by the allergy-causing caterpillars of the woolly bear moth. The insects dropped guerrilla-fashion from an overhanging tree to shut down their local box during the Leeds postal strike.

The union members turned down half-measures and insisted on the Post Office moving the box some yards down the street away from the tree.

DHSS unions get sick of solvents

Union members at Shoreditch DHSS have taken effective action against one of the most complicated hazards threatening workers' health – air pollution that drifts in from the workplace next door.

In this case the problem was the nauseating smell of solvents coming intermittently from the back windows of a print factory backing onto the DHSS offices. In the hot July weather, people sitting near windows were getting sore throats, headaches and streaming eyes. Complaints to the DHSS management didn't help much. And a local authority

environmental health officer (EHO) who was called in by the DHSS unions turned up on a day when the smell wasn't too bad, and went away unimpressed.

SCPS safety representative Peter Gandy rang the Hazards Centre to find out about printing chemicals. We advised that the symptoms could be caused by a number of organic solvents used to dilute inks and clean up after printing. Whatever the chemicals involved, office employers have an obligation to provide breathable air. And anything which makes you feel ill is "toxic".

Black worker wins case

Yvonne Powell, the Black woman whose case was reported in *Daily Hazard* No.6, has won final victory in her long campaign to prove that she was unfairly sacked from her job as a VDU operator.

In our previous report we told how an industrial tribunal unanimously decided that Yvonne, who has multiple sclerosis, had been unfairly sacked for incompetence by Outset Office Services. Outset appealed against the decision. An employment appeal tribunal on May 1

rejected the appeal and refused them the right to take the case any further.

The tribunal's reason for backing the early verdict was that Outset had sacked Yvonne for being "incapable of performing the work" *without first finding out if her multiple sclerosis affected her ability to do the job.*

Yvonne's case establishes that it will be unfair dismissal if an employer sacks a worker without thorough investigation of any medical condition which could affect working ability.

On July 9 the smell was back, worse than ever, and the workers decided they'd had enough. A joint SCPS and CPSA emergency branch meeting voted unanimously to demand management action. The result was a surprise visit by management and unions to the factory. Once inside, there was no question about the source of the pollution. "The smell inside was awful," said Peter Gandy, "I felt sick after five minutes and my manager felt sick after two."

The print manager denied the smell had anything to do with him. But the visiting DHSS workers could see equipment for screen printing on vinyl near the back windows of the factory. The ketones and aromatic hydrocarbons used in screen printing are well-known chemical hazards.

The next step was to phone the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) print inspectors at Neasden. The resulting visit left a mixed impression of the HSE's usefulness. The firm, Print Integrators, wasn't registered with the HSE as a workplace.

The inspector said any strong smell would make them feel sick, and they only felt they were being poisoned. But he did suggest an alternative ink and asked to be told if the process was used again.

The SCPS and CPSA members have told SOGAT and the NGA that there's a workplace in Shoreditch where the workers badly need a bit of organising on health and safety . . .

Work causes menstrual havoc

Thirteen young women working in the same office of a government department were asked: "Has there been any change in your menstrual cycle since you began working with VDUs?" Eight answered "no", and five said "yes". Of these five, two had increased symptoms of premenstrual tension (PMT), one had both PMT and irregular cycles, and another woman had had no periods at all for months.

Some of these women were among more than 20 who came to the first meeting of the London Hazards Centre's **Women's Health and Hazards Group** in June to discuss Period Problems and Work. Several of the women present had experienced menstrual problems which they put down to the stress of work, use of VDUs, and working with chemicals.

There is little information on



JENNY MATTHEWS/FORMAT

Women's health on the line

the ways in which chemicals such as solvents or pesticides, physical agents such as vibration or radiation, and work routines such as shifts and machine-paced production interfere with women's periods.

Agents that can cause menstrual irregularities are

likely to have other effects on both male and female reproduction – and on other body systems or organs.

At its June meeting, the Women's Health and Hazards Group decided to draw up a questionnaire that could be filled in by individuals or distributed more widely in a workplace. Once the questionnaire is ready, the Group hopes to use the women's press to publicise it.

As well as undertaking this specific project, the Group is a useful forum for women to discuss any other hazards they may be facing at work. So if you want to come along to a meeting and discuss what's happening (or not happening) in your workplace, or if you want to get involved with the development of the questionnaire, please contact Alex, Maggie or Roslyn at the Hazards Centre.

SPOT NEWS

Lung cancer

○ US studies have shown that about 12 per cent of lung cancer deaths are caused by air pollution such as vehicle exhaust fumes. Using data from these studies, Friends of the Earth have calculated that more than 3,000 of the 26,000 men who die from lung cancer in England and Wales each year are killed by exposure to such pollutants.

Pesticides

○ At least 4,000 people are acutely poisoned by pesticides each year, according to evidence given to the Agriculture Select Committee of the House of Commons last month by Dr Virginia Murray of the National Poisons Unit.

Job-share!

The London Hazards Centre needs a worker to job-share with a male Black worker currently employed full-time. She or he will join a self-servicing collective of seven people, and share in the collective workload. With her/his job-sharer the worker will play an important role in helping the collective increase the relevance and accessibility of the Centre to Black Londoners.

The most important qualification is active involvement – past or present – in community or trade union groups. The London Hazards Centre is working towards being an Equal Opportunities Employer, and has a policy to assist with child care costs. We welcome applications from Black people, especially women, and from people of any age, sexual orientation or physical ability.

Full-time salary: £13,000
Closing date: Friday August 22



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