

THE DAILY HAZARD

Estate on gas alert

Winter exposes tenants all over London to the results of bad heating design. We report on one campaign to change things.

Inadequately maintained and obsolete gas fired heating units have been poisoning tenants on the Woolwich Common Estate. It was the tenants' Action Group that tracked the hazard down by making the vital connection between one tenant's illness and a broken flue. Nearly a year of symptoms such as drowsiness, lethargy and headaches – treated as severe depression by her GP – had been due to the endless recirculation of carbon monoxide which should have been vented outside.

Tiredness, nausea, headaches, depression, redness in the face, and lack of concentration can be signs that this colourless, odourless gas is in the air. It particularly affects young children, old people, pregnant women and people with heart conditions. It can also kill: 60 people die in their homes every year thanks to badly installed or maintained gas appliances, says the Health and Safety Executive, and there is no legal standard for the training of gas fitters.

Once the link was made, the Woolwich Common Action Group found other tenants were suffering similar, although less severe symptoms.

Poor maintenance was one

clear cause of the danger. For example, as far as the tenants know the flues have never been cleaned. Spare parts are hard to get because the system is obsolete. The Action Group demanded details of the maintenance contract as a first step.

Armed with information from the Hazards Centre on carbon monoxide poisoning and proper maintenance, the Action Group produced a leaflet to alert all tenants to the dangers. In February they will follow this up by carrying out some simple tests for carbon monoxide with equipment borrowed from the Centre.

The Halcyon type of heating system, well or badly maintained, does a poor job at Wool-

● If you are worried about gas leaks or fumes from a heating appliance, tell the landlord and the Gas Board immediately. If you don't get proper attention, call the Health and Safety Executive, who are responsible under the Gas Act.

● HSE has published a leaflet on the dangers of open-flued gas water heaters ("geysers"). They can kill if the flue is damaged or blocked, if the burners are not working properly, or if they are drawing air from the room.

wich Common. Hot air from the central unit rarely reaches outlying rooms – one reason why so many of the Woolwich Common bedrooms have severe condensation and mould growth. Where the hot air does reach, it carries dust with it.

Tenants suspect that the dust, cold and damp make their children ill. A local GP has observed a high rate of asthma and bronchitis in children, and the Action Group is planning a more detailed survey. This may provide yet more arguments to support their demands for a proper solution: insulation with safe materials and an efficient hot-water heating system.

● *Campaigning against Dampness* by SCAT (Services to Community Action and Trade Unions) is just out in a new edition, completely revised and updated. It's full of facts and ideas. Highly recommended. £1.50 to tenants and unions from LHC or from SCAT, 31 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1.

Locals ditch asbestos dumpers

A massive and well-organised protest campaign by local residents has forced contractors to abandon the dumping of asbestos waste at a quarry in Hertfordshire.

Pressure from community groups in Hoddesdon, backed by advice and a technical report from the Hazards Centre, came to a head in July when a huge public meeting passed a vote of no confidence in Hertfordshire County Council's actions in licensing the site at Broxbournebury for hazardous waste (see *Daily Hazard* No.9).

Dumping was temporarily suspended in September while the county council held a public meeting and then a three-day public inquiry. The backdown by the company excavating the site of a former asbestos cement factory at Watford came on Christmas Eve. The remaining 70,000 tonnes of waste are now being



The people celebrate . . .

trucked to Cambridgeshire County Council's tip at Conington.

It is not a complete victory for the protestors. Their demand that the material should be made safe on site in Watford has been lost – and the dump at Broxbournebury still has a hazardous waste licence which they want revoked.

Meanwhile in Essex, dustbin for three-quarters of Britain's five million tonnes a year of hazardous waste and an increasing share of industrial garbage from the continent, people living near the Cleanaway site at South Ockenden are organising against



asbestos dumping stops but other waste still comes in

the continued dumping of asbestos and other dangerous substances.

Complaints of dust, noise and other pollution as lorries trundle past residents' homes at the rate of five a minute have so far not impressed Thurrock District Council. Protestors say the council is not forcing waste contractors to use a brand new highway because the lorries would hold up business traffic.

Recently Essex County Council agreed with local residents and at the last minute stopped Cleanaway accepting 4,000 tonnes of arsenic waste from the continent.

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Women's health at work

If you've ever thought that work was disrupting your menstrual cycle – perhaps because of stress, VDU work or chemicals you're exposed to at work – you might be interested in the London Hazards Centre's **Women's Health and Hazards Group**.

This group, which started to meet last year, has drawn up a questionnaire on menstrual problems, for women doing any type of work. The questionnaire is being piloted in three different workplaces.

The women's group meets about every six weeks. We're particularly keen that women who are trying to get something done about health hazards they face at work, but feel isolated, should be able to come to the group for support.

For the date of the next meeting contact Alex, Maggie, Nilou or Roslyn on 01-837 5605.

Community groups uncover 'weird' warnings set-up

More than a year after the introduction of new "right to know" regulations the communities around two of London's seven "major accident hazard" sites are still highly critical of the warning systems devised by chemical companies, local councils and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

Both plants store huge quantities of the poisonous gas chlorine – up to 60 tonnes at Berk Spencer Acids in Canning Town, east London, and up to 90 tonnes at the May and Baker pesticide factory in Belvedere, south east London. In both areas, community groups have discovered identical faults in arrangements made under the Control of Industrial Major Accidents (CIMAH) Regulations:

○ Warning zone too small

The "potential hazard area" defined by the HSE is within a circle with a radius of only one kilometre around the plants. A study by the chemical company ICI predicted that 100 tonnes of chlorine released in a wind of just under six miles an hour would produce "a plume containing a fatal dose" three miles long and two miles wide. Inside this zone people exposed to the gas would die in less than three minutes; outside it there would be severe injuries in an area approximately five miles square.

"We believe that the area leafletted should be extended to at least the same radius as that encompassed by the emergency plan drawn up by Newham Council, which is at present a radius of four kilometres from

the factory," said Charles Turner of Eastlea Community Association.

"When we went to see the HSE at Barking the inspector had a transparent overlay showing the plume going well beyond the one kilometre line but she wouldn't give us a copy."

At Belvedere, May and Baker is also under pressure to increase the one kilometre radius. The local action group BADCAP (Belvedere And District Campaign Against Pollution) has been given the astonishing assurance that the nearby railway line would "form a natural barrier in case of a gas leak".

○ Hit-and-miss leafletting

A door-to-door survey by Eastlea Community Association revealed "altogether weird" distribution of the Berk Spencer Acids warning leaflet: one house would have it and the next one wouldn't. The association phoned the head teachers of all local schools and found that none had received the leaflet. Gainsborough Junior School is less than half a kilometre from the site. BADCAP found that only one of the local schools had received the May and Baker information card.

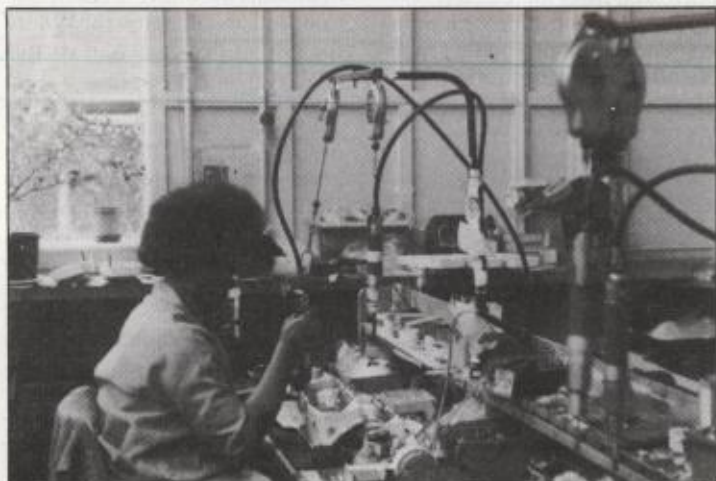
○ Inaudible sirens

May and Baker's siren, first tested eight months after the legal deadline, could not be heard over the sound of a washing machine in a house near the factory. Berk Spencer Acids' siren was inaudible inside Eastlea Community School, less than a kilometre from the site.

○ Inadequate information

The leaflet distributed in Newham and Tower Hamlets gives no indication that chlorine gas can kill. BADCAP points to an apparent contradiction in the May and Baker information card. People are told to go inside and close all doors and windows. But anyone needing medical attention should be "kept in fresh air".

"We believe that if Berk Spencer Acids are to continue their operations in such a built-up and heavily populated area as this, they must go a lot further in their efforts to inform and reassure local people," said Charles Turner.



Micro-electronics assembly workers are exposed to many hazards

The human cost of clean chips

Spotless workplaces . . . high tech products . . . jobs for life . . . the squeaky clean industry of the future, where workers' health is protected by a caring, concerned management. That's what the micro-electronics industry would have us believe.

The average electronics factory certainly looks clean – microchips can be ruined by the merest speck of dust. Unfortunately, the pollutants that are

harmless to chips and ruinous to workers are rather more abundant in the workplace air.

The list contains cancer agents, irritants, poisons, highly corrosive chemicals and reproductive hazards so it is not surprising that workers suffer four times the level of sickness found in industry as a whole.

Workers – mostly Asian women – assembling electronic components in a North London

factory complained of headaches, vomiting, dizziness and fainting, and some suspected that workplace hazards could explain the high number of miscarriages.

In another case, workers soldering printed circuit boards became allergic to the solder fume and suffered dermatitis and severe breathing difficulty after even the smallest exposure. This condition afflicts 22 per cent of all electronics assembly workers.

Chemicals aren't the only risk. Tenosynovitis – tendon disease of the lower arm – disables an ever-increasing number of production workers in micro-electronics. It is caused by the endless repetition of badly devised assembly tasks. One victim recently received £10,000 damages – derisory compensation for someone who may never work again.

Even living close to these factories can be hazardous. Waste solvent dumped down drains frequently finds its way through the sewers and into local homes, carried on the air or in the public water supply.

Are workplace pollution and subsequent sickness and disease a necessary price to pay for this industry of the future? Hardly. Safe methods of work can be devised for all jobs in micro-electronics.

Council must clear cockroaches

A two-year struggle to rid a Tower Hamlets estate of an appalling cockroach infestation has ended in a court victory for a Bengali tenant and embarrassment for Tower Hamlets Environmental Health Department.

Christchurch Estate is a complex of damp, poorly heated and ill maintained post-war council flats. The estate is in Spitalfields, a particularly neglected area of the East End with a large Bengali community. Complaints about cockroaches were first made to Tower Hamlets Council nearly three years ago and were met with little effective action.

Concerned tenants enlisted the help of Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) which undertook a survey of two blocks on the estate. The survey revealed the true extent of the problem – the majority of properties were affected. An independent Environmental Health Officer's report criticised the council's methods of treatment and advised that only complete "block treatments" would rid the estate of cockroaches.

The council disagreed. Their postal survey indicated the problem was not serious enough to justify block treatments; piecemeal treatment of individual flats would continue. The cockroaches, meanwhile, voted with



Using advice and cockroach traps supplied by the Hazards Centre, this tenant from the York One Estate Tenants' Association, Wandsworth, took her six-year-old infestation to court and won a commitment from the council to do block treatment.

their feet, which continued to patter unperturbed throughout the estate, despite repeated pesticide treatments in individual flats.

One tenant, tired by the council's failure to deal effectively with the infestation, took the council to court. He was supported by both SHAPRS and the independent EHO, who testified that the infestation constituted a

"statutory nuisance" and should be remedied by the council. The council's defence centred on the argument that the infestation "was not their act of fault or suffrance". They attempted to justify this defence by laying the blame with the tenant. It was alleged that the tenant failed to co-operate with the sprayers and that his family's lifestyle encouraged the infestation.

The tenant was subjected to lengthy cross-examination by the barrister representing the London Borough of Tower Hamlets but, with the help of a Bengali translator provided by SHAPRS, ably demonstrated that any "act of fault or suffrance" was the council's, not his. His representatives felt that he might not have been treated with the same suspicion had he been white.

The court found against Tower Hamlets Council, declaring the cockroaches to be a statutory nuisance. The council was ordered to carry out full block treatment.

SHAPRS is still concerned at how widespread a problem cockroaches are in the area. A third survey is showing that the council may have many more block treatments to undertake.

Spitalfields is one of London's poorest wards, with high unemployment and many residents living in cramped, unfit housing. But disadvantage takes away more than home comforts. Disadvantage kills. The death rate for people under 45 in Spitalfields is more than double that in affluent Cranham West, Havering. And the pattern is repeated across London: in the poorest wards 11.59 people per thousand die aged between 45 and 64, compared with 6.56 per thousand in the richest wards.

Raw deal in catering

The General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades Union (GMBATU) has produced a new edition of *Risks à la Carte*, its health and safety reference guide for safety reps in the hotel and catering industry. This updated edition has new sections on sexual harassment and Crown immunity.

In the five years since the first edition, there has been a fierce assault on service industry workers' conditions. *Waiting for Change*, by GMBATU and the Low Pay Unit, takes a more comprehensive look at conditions in the hotel and catering industry and puts hazards in their political context: low pay, victimisation, privatisation, deregulation, racist and sexist employment

practices, and exploitation of young people. The chapter on health and safety discusses the Centre for Trade Union Studies survey which demonstrates the advantages of trade union organisation in the hotel and catering industry. Rather than turning a blind eye to the difficulties of union organisation in this sector the book looks at ways of overcoming them.

Other useful publications are *SWAAP Bulletin* from Service Workers Action and Advisory Project and *Alternative Menu*, the bulletin of the TGWU International Hotel and Catering Branch.

Risks à la Carte, £5 from GMBATU, Thorne House, Ruxley Ridge, Claygate, Esher, Surrey.

Waiting for Change, £3 from LPU, 9 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1.

SWAAP, Room 160 South Bank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1.

Asbestos news

● The People's Asbestos Action Campaign's National Conference on 3-5 April will focus on organising local victims' support groups and on asbestos waste dumping. One support group was set up in Glasgow in November thanks to Action on Clydeside's campaigning work

● In addition to *Dust to Dust: An Asbestos Documentary* and *Cheap, Cheerful and Deadly*, the Hazards Centre has recently got copies of two more videos on asbestos which groups can borrow for meetings:

Alice - A Fight for Life 90 min, Yorkshire TV (1982), VHS

This documentary has inspired many groups campaigning against asbestos. It shows the complacency and greed of the asbestos industry in exposing millions of workers to asbestos

with building workers. It aims to help victims and their families through the inhumane compensation system, and to publicise the fight to change the system. Details of the conference from Maire Pytharas, London Asbestos Action Campaign, 308 Gray's Inn Road, WC1X 8DS; 833 2487.

despite knowledge dating back to 1898 about its lethal properties.

Asbestos in Buildings 30 min, Institution of Environmental Health Officers (1986), VHS

Although this is not aimed primarily at campaigning and organising groups, it does provide a useful summary of the facts, supported by detailed technical and legal information, on the location, identification, monitoring and removal of asbestos.

Fluorescent lighting: schools ignore risks to save money

Just suppose your local education authority had a device that could make it difficult for your children to concentrate, make them irritable, tired and possibly ill – and the authority intended to put several in every classroom. Fluorescent lighting can cause these and many other problems and will soon, Inner London Education Authority policy-makers insist, replace the safer incandescent light bulbs in London schools.

Fluorescent lighting is cheaper to install and run than ordinary lighting, particularly when poor quality tubes are used. But whilst ILEA confidently predicts cash savings, the cost to pupils' health is harder to calculate. Flicker, glare and ultraviolet light can all cause problems. Behavioural disorders, difficulty in concentrating, allergies and hyperactivity are reported ill effects. Other research raises questions about the long-term consequences of exposure to fluorescent light. But the most common complaints are headaches and a dislike for the "harsh" and "unfriendly" light.

NUT health and safety advisers report "hundreds of complaints per year" concerning fluorescent lighting, mainly about flicker, failing tubes and poor maintenance. The flicker

rate and ultraviolet radiation emissions increase in ageing and poorly maintained tubes. In some authorities, older fittings leak toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), although ILEA claim that all hazardous fittings in their properties have now been dealt with. A recent HM Schools Inspectors' report found that maintenance has suffered as a result of cutbacks, with the work of pupils and staff

adversely affected as a result.

Parents at a West London school were told that their children were to be transferred to portakabins. In addition to their poor ventilation and excessive noise and dust, portakabins are lit by fluorescent tubes. Using their own research and information from the Hazards Centre, the parents put their case against fluorescent lights to representatives of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Department of the Environment (DoE) and ILEA. A parent complained that the HSE and DoE were uninformed and uninterested and that ILEA, far from considering removing fluorescent lights, intended to see them in all classrooms. The parents stood firm and the fluorescent lighting was replaced. ILEA stressed, however, that this case was an exception and the policy on introduction of fluorescent lighting remained unchanged.

An ILEA spokesperson confirmed that, for reasons of economy, the authority intends to replace all incandescent lighting with fluorescent tubes. He added, "to our knowledge, there is no proven link between fluorescent light and ill-health".

● A booklet on fluorescent lighting is in preparation at the Hazards Centre and we hope it will be published in the Spring.



JOHN HARRIS

'Urgent' U-turn on weedkiller

The government has banned "as a matter of urgency" the sale, supply and use of the common weedkiller **dinoseb**. The ban covers 30 products, including the related compounds dinoterb and binapacryl.

The UK's Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF) has followed the example of the US Environmental Protection Agency which banned dinoseb in October after animal tests showed that it causes birth defects and infertility. The EPA estimated that a pregnant woman exposed to a typical occupational level of dinoseb on a single occasion could give birth to a deformed child.

The ministry acted in December, just over five weeks after a senior official told a meeting of London council employers and trade unionists that pesticides were not banned on the basis of decisions made by agencies in other countries.

The same meeting was told that MAFF would carry out an urgent review of the safety of the herbicide **2,4-D** in the light of a US study showing increased cancer rates in people exposed to it.

The trade unions NUPE and GMBATU have already advised their members not to handle 2,4-D and it is banned in several

London boroughs.

The government has also announced "urgent tests" on the insecticide **aldicarb** – most commonly known under the Union Carbide trade name, **Temik** – after US research found that small doses can damage the body's immune system.

● More information on these developments appears in the fourth issue of the *Pesticides Action Bulletin*, newsletter of the London Pesticides Action Group, due out in February. Details from Frank Slight, Convenor, LPAG, 47 Gaskell Road, London N5.

Centre news

The London Hazards Centre provides advice and information to tenants' associations, trade unions and community groups organising against hazards.

● The Centre's *Annual Report 1985-86* was published in December. Existing and new affiliates will receive it automatically. Available to non-affiliates at £5.

● Our new publicity leaflet is enclosed with this issue. We hope you can help us by passing it on and by asking us for more copies if you can use them.

● On 11 December the London Hazards Centre Ltd held its second AGM. Elections were held and the Centre welcomes the following representatives to the Management Council:

Sheila Rosser ASTMS Division 15

Fred Higgs TGWU Region 1

Layi Adesanu Newham Tower Blocks Tenants Campaign

Midge Purcell Hackney Trade Union Support Unit

Sandra Bryant Greater London Trade Union Resource Unit

Ergül Norr Turkish Education Group

Jeff Cooper SERA

Other council members are appointed by the Centre's "specialist" Working/Support Groups:

Reg Green TGWU Agricultural Trade Group (*Trade Union*)

Jane Keeper College Place Tenants Association (*Community*)

Jenny Davenport NCU London North Central Internal Branch (*Women*)

Marsid Greenidge Camden Black Workers Group (*Black People*)

Keith Holtom Camden Trades Council Support Unit (*Information*)

The Centre's workers are also members of the council.

