

THE DAILY HAZARD

Modern office conditions – more than just a headache

Building sickness at work

Pneumonia, hypersensitivity pneumonitis, humidifier fever, legionnaires' disease – you could imagine these were ailments suffered by workers in the damp, grimy mills of nineteenth century Britain. But these diseases, and many more, afflict increasing numbers of workers in modern, air-conditioned offices.

Constant complaints about ill-health from NALGO members in Kensington and Chelsea council offices worried union officers. Laurie Lopes, secretary to the NALGO branch, observed: "Everyone in the new offices seems to complain of colds and generally feeling under par. Sore throats and colds drag on and on. So far it's been difficult identifying the cause . . . but we intend to find the problem and do something about it."

Working with the Hazards Centre, branch officers put together a questionnaire which should throw some light on how certain buildings are making people sick. All 1,255 NALGO members in the borough are being asked to complete it, to investigate the complaints and the symptoms they suffer.

Promotional literature from Milton Keynes Development Corporation gave pride of place to the glittering mirror-glazed facade of the Milton Keynes Job Centre. CPSA members at the Centre regarded it less fondly. They suffered twice the sickness of workers in other job centres in the area. Using a questionnaire they demonstrated that stagnant air, the product of an inadequate ventilation system, was largely responsible for their ill-health. The union's long fight against a less-than-enthusiastic employer resulted in a package of improvements to the office costing £30,000.

Air-conditioning systems

THE BUILDING SICKNESS SYNDROME

Infections: Bacteria and viruses can thrive in drip trays and ducting of air-conditioning systems. Passed into workplace air, they cause colds, 'flu, bronchitis, pneumonia, URTI (upper respiratory tract infections). Australian workers have won compensation for URTI.

Allergies: Dust, pollen, algae, fungi etc – cause allergic rhinitis (sore, runny nose), sinusitis, asthma, humidifier fever.

Irritation: Chemicals, cigarette smoke, traffic fumes, dust – can irritate lungs, nose, throat, sinuses. Constant lung irritation can lead to bronchitis.

Legionnaires' disease: Caused by bacteria spread through moist air from air-conditioning system. Symptoms – fever, coughing, pneumonia. Sometimes sore throat, rash, sensitivity to light. Liver and kidney damage possible – death may result.

work by introducing "conditioned" air to the workplace and removing the old air. Several factors can cause these systems to increase the amount of indoor pollution and to spread bugs around the office. To cut down on heating bills, many systems have recirculation units which take the expensively heated stale air and re-introduce it – together with any contaminants – to the office. In many workplaces only 20 per cent of the air entering the office is fresh. The remainder is air that has been breathed before.

Humidifiers control the level of moisture in the air, often inefficiently. The correct level should be between 40 and 60 per cent. If there is too little moisture, workers are more likely to suffer eye, nose, throat and chest infections because the body's defence mechanisms cannot function properly. Headaches, stuffiness and sinus problems

Respiratory illnesses and malaise:

Frequent complaints of constant or recurring sore throats (three times more common than in naturally ventilated offices), coughs and wheezes, runny/sore nose (five times more common), lethargy and headaches (twice as common). "Three o'clock flush", a distinctive reddening of the face late in the afternoon, is also reported.

Humidifier fever: 'Flu-like symptoms – fever, chills, cough, breathlessness, muscle ache. Symptoms worst after break from office – after holidays or weekend ("Monday morning fever").

Hypersensitivity pneumonitis:

Symptoms as humidifier fever, but persist as long as worker remains in air-conditioned building. Can become long-term disease if exposure to airborne contaminants continues – productive cough, weight loss, lung damage. Australian workers have won compensation.

would also be more common.

But if the air is too moist, bugs such as bacteria, algae and viruses breed, and are then inhaled, causing disease. Most humidifiers and ducting, if badly designed or not regularly maintained and cleaned, provide an excellent breeding ground for bugs. Steam injection humidifiers, which kill bugs just before introducing the air to the workplace, can prevent this.

Usually, no single factor is responsible for building sickness, so it is not easy to demand improvements. But trade union action did win a decent office environment for workers in Milton Keynes, as Cathy Pearce, branch secretary of Beds and North Bucks CPSA branch, concluded: "Our fight has shown members in the office that it is possible to improve their working environment if they unite and do not simply accept what management says."

Centre's funding uncertain

The Hazards Centre's annual grant ran out on 31 March. From 1 April the Centre loses the salaries of two workers.

It wasn't till three weeks before the funding year began that the Centre knew it would get any money at all. The Centre's management council was on the point of issuing redundancy notices when news came through that the London Boroughs Grants Committee (LBGC) had finally set its 1987-88 budget.

Now we have just three months' money for five of our seven posts – while we wait for the Committee to consider our application.

Two of the Centre's workers are unlikely to be funded by the LGBC. They were employed under a two-year GLC grant to set up and run the computerised information system. The pilot work has gone well, and if the GLC still existed it would probably be paying for the Centre to build on this success. But for the LBGC, picking up this work would be "expansion", and there is no money for expansion.

We don't know what will happen next, but we need your support.

Please affiliate to the Centre.

Please ask your union to make a donation.

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We are funded by all the London boroughs

Workers fight violence

"Refused to leave HAC after interview, demanding rehousing. Police called at 5pm. He continued to be abusive to them and was arrested."

The last few years have seen a massive increase in violent attacks on workers whose jobs bring them into contact with the public. This entry from an incident book in Lewisham's Housing Advisory Centre highlights some of the reasons why.

Cuts in public expenditure – on housing in this case – mean that more people are making desperate demands on local authority housing services. Councils have neither the money to build homes nor the resources to provide adequate advisory services. Even those authorities with a policy of "no cuts in services" know that in reality a service has been cut if the demand for it increases but extra resources cannot be provided.

In February, at a TUC conference on "Violence to Staff", delegates heard that the threat of violent attack from the public now affects nearly half the working population. The risk is widespread, involving most sectors of employment: health service and DHSS workers, teachers, shopworkers, social workers, postal

workers, housing workers, bank and post office staff, gardeners, park-keepers, bar staff and – particularly – transport workers.

Between 1979 and 1983, there were about 10,000 reported assaults on bus workers in Great Britain. And recent studies have shown that in many sectors the risk of injury from violent attack is equal to the risk of "conventional accident".

Until the TUC was asked by Conference in the early 1980s to put pressure on the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), there was no guidance to employers about handling violence at work. Statistics on violent incidents were practically non-existent and there was (and is) much under-reporting. The HSE set up a Committee on Violence which has initiated studies in several high-risk sectors, but few managements seem to be taking an active role in protecting their workforce.

Employers have a general legal duty under Section 2 of the Health and Safety At Work Act 1974 to take steps to prevent assaults on workers. One of the points reiterated at the TUC conference was that employers are not taking this duty seriously: too often they view violence as an issue for the police and fail to take steps to help prevent the stress, anger and frustration associated with actual violence or the fear of it.

The lack of systematic reporting and recording of assaults and other incidents was also highlighted as a major problem. Trade union estimates are that between 50 and 70 per cent of

Checking violence

- **Define what is meant by "violence"** – actual physical injury, verbal abuse including abuse that is sexist or racist in nature, threats with or without weapons, spitting, kissing – and many other sorts of angry, harassing or intimidating behaviour
- **Identify all jobs where workers come into contact with the public. Identify potentially high risk groups**
- **Investigate the problem in more detail**, perhaps by a survey or by talking to workers involved
- **Make a report to your members**
- **Urge management to appoint a senior person to develop a preventive strategy in consultation with the union(s).** Management should prepare an explicit written policy as part of the employer's health and safety policy
- **Make sure that all incidents, including those where there was a fear or threat of violence, are reported, recorded and analysed in a systematic way**
- **Consider a range of preventive measures for each problem area**, eg physical environment, staffing levels, training
- **Make sure decisions are implemented and regularly monitored** by joint union/management (health and safety) committee
- **Review arrangements for compensation, victim support**

assaults on local authority workers go unrecorded.

The conference heard Barry Poyner from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations present new HSE report "Violence to Staff", which lays down a framework for analysing and helping to prevent violent assaults. The report should be useful to trade unionists starting to negotiate agreements in this area but it fails to address racist and sexist violence.

Violence to Staff: A basis for assessment and prevention by Barry Poyner and Caroline Warne for the HSE. HMSO (London) 1986, £3.50
TUC: *Preventing Violence to Staff: Progress Report Feb 1987*



In 1985, 362 assaults on London underground workers were reported. Knives, sharp weapons or firearms were used in 35 incidents. There appears to be a link between staffing levels and assaults.

Screens in Lewisham

In 1986 there was a lengthy dispute between NALGO members working in the Housing Advisory Centre and Lewisham Council. Because of fears of violence – and actual assault – the HAC workers wanted management to install fixed protective screens in this walk-in Centre. The Council, however, didn't want permanent screens, arguing that screens would create an unnecessary barrier between the staff and people in need of housing advice.

Eventually, after a strike by Lewisham NALGO, a joint working party was set up with an agreement to take the dispute to arbitration. The London Hazards Centre was asked to investigate,

and found plenty of things other than screens that needed looking at:

- poor lay-out and overcrowding of the whole centre, especially the public waiting room, parts of which could not be seen from the reception desk
- poor sound insulation between interviewing cubicles
- no public toilets or telephones
- inadequate ventilation, heating and lighting
- high sickness rate and staff turnover, indicating unhealthy levels of stress in the job
- sporadic reporting of threats etc. in the incident book/no standard record forms
- inadequate assaults procedure and training
- piecemeal approach to security
- inadequate staffing levels and training, particularly in the reception area
- no appointment system

As the *Daily Hazard* went to press, the two sides had largely agreed the Hazards Centre's recommendations – although the question of permanent screens was still at deadlock.

NALGO: Health and Safety Briefing on Violence At Work (March 1985) From Research Section, NALGO, 1 Mabledon Place, London WC1.

Survey in Islington

NUPE stewards in the London Borough of Islington noticed last year that more and more members were coming to the union complaining about violent incidents. The stewards soon realised that this was because the Council's health and safety policy was

inadequate when it came to support for members who had been assaulted or threatened at work.

Recognising that employers have a duty to provide a safe and healthy workplace and methods of work, and that steps can be taken to reduce the risk of assaults, NUPE has begun to investigate the problem.

An "assaults sub-committee" was set up. With the help of the London Hazards Centre, it drew up a questionnaire for completion in the different Council departments. Because the issue is sensitive, stewards – who are also the health and safety reps in NUPE – are carrying out personal interviews with members to ensure a good response.

Workers already known to be under threat of assault are those who work alone – particularly women in the parks department, home-helps and cleaners – and those who come into direct contact with the public.

Asbestos in schools: teachers and parents fight political backlash

The Inner London Education Authority was once renowned for its enlightened and technically advanced policies for removing asbestos from schools. Even when the practice fell short of the paper policy – see *Daily Hazard No.9* – the authority's good intentions were not in doubt.

Today ILEA faces a deficit of £100 million. The government has refused it the extra £25 million for the teachers' pay settlement. And the asbestos removal programme is in ruins. In school after school, union safety reps and their advisers from the Hazards Centre now have to argue against plans designed to cut costs rather than remove danger. Trade union demands for safe removal as soon as possible are dismissed as unreasonable in the light of "scientific evidence" from ILEA's own experts.

Increasingly, as shown in the case histories below, trade union action to defend the health of pupils and staff is met with obstruction and threats of disciplinary action. But the case histories also show that staff, parents and pupils can still win safe removal instead of bodgery and cover-up.

Holland Park Comprehensive. One of the first schools inspected by ILEA, in 1984, it was still not completely surveyed by February this year. Over two years passed from the time ILEA knew about the asbestos until it informed staff.

Early this year members of the teaching unions closed potentially hazardous areas of the school and called a meeting to inform pupils and parents of the problem. ILEA threatened staff with disciplinary action and loss of pay. A letter to parents blamed teachers for causing the trouble and said that although the asbestos was safe it would be removed in due course.

Under continuing pressure from teachers, parents and pupils, ILEA accepted that asbestos should be removed and that work would start immediately. Most will be finished by the end of the summer break.

Hackney Downs. One of six schools in Hackney closed because of asbestos problems,

Campaigns for the safe removal of asbestos from schools are meeting strong opposition from the cash-starved Inner London Education Authority. ILEA's new get-tough policy means postponing removal work, covering up asbestos with paint or wallpaper, and cracking down on trade unionists who object.

Meanwhile Tory critics have accused the authority of being "paranoid" about asbestos. The teachers, whose successful actions are described on this page, are charged with being motivated by "ideology and politics".

Those leading the backlash against asbestos removal claim there is no evidence that it endangers children in schools. Independent agencies and experts, including the world's foremost authority, do not agree . . .

Leave it in place, says Hackney GP



“The health and academic performance of thousands of children are being put at risk by an irrational obsession with asbestos . . . motivated not by a concern for the health of our children, but by ideology and politics”

Dr Gerard Bulger, GP, school governor and would-be Tory councillor in Hackney, *Daily Mail*, 4 March 1987

Take it out, say world experts

Schools:

“... the control of potential public exposure makes it essential to act to remove asbestos from schools.” Professor Irving Selikoff of Mount Sinai Medical Center, New York, the world's foremost authority on asbestos diseases.

Risks to children:

“... the risk of mesothelioma is very much higher when exposure occurs early in life.” Health and Safety Commission.

Children may also be more at risk as “tissues in which natural growth is taking place may be more susceptible to carcinogens (cancer-causing substances) than adult tissues.” Health and Safety Executive.

“... because of the rapid increase of risk with time, the lifetime effect of exposure on childhood is likely to be much greater than if exposure begins in adulthood.” US Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Hackney Downs was the subject of an independent report which ILEA commissioned from the Hazards Centre. We found that “encapsulation of asbestos” was not an adequate solution. All asbestos would have to be removed, some of it before children could return.

Low level exposures:

“... it is prudent to behave as if asbestos fibres may be carcinogenic at low exposure levels.” US Consumer Product Safety Commission.

The Commission estimated that three children in every thousand exposed to the “acceptable” level of 0.01 fibres/ml for ten years would die of an asbestos-related disease.

Peak exposures:

One peak exposure – for example during accidental damage of an asbestos panel – can give the same asbestos dose in one hour as would normally be inhaled over one year. US Environmental Protection Agency

Asbestos cement:

West German research on fibre release from asbestos cement shows “considerable release of fibres to the general environment.” Professor Irving Selikoff (personal communication).

In a low-ceilinged corridor the brown asbestos ceiling tiles showed the marks of children's feet – clear proof that they were likely to be damaged and must therefore be removed. Tests demanded by the Hazards Centre confirmed the risk. Banging the tiles during an air test pro-

duces levels of contamination six times the limit (0.06 fibres/ml).

ILEA's first response was to propose that the ceiling should be wallpapered. After weeks of pressure from parents and teachers, ILEA conceded that the tiles – and other asbestos in the school – would have to come out.

Daneford. Scene of a long-running battle between teachers demanding removal and ILEA's determination to encapsulate even blue asbestos, Daneford proves that cover-ups are dangerous. Fires and damage have re-exposed the asbestos. The Hazards Centre is now working with teachers to ensure that the next programme – phased removal over a two-year period – is done safely. Union safety reps have secured extra time off the job to monitor stripping work done in term time.

The Skinners' School. The latest example of ILEA getting tough on anyone challenging its judgement on how to deal with asbestos. When a mass of broken asbestos lagging was found in the roof space, ILEA wanted to seal it in – despite the evidence (see *Daily Hazard No.9*) that this “solution” is almost bound to fail.

On 10 March, union representatives and a worker from the Hazards Centre arrived to investigate the situation. They were told that ILEA would not allow them to enter the building.

A large meeting, including non-teaching staff, voted overwhelmingly that the Hazards Centre should be allowed to carry out an independent survey on their behalf.

Briefing

● **Asbestos in schools; briefing notes for pupils, parents and trade union representatives** (free – £5.00 others). Gives convincing arguments for asbestos removal from all school premises. London Hazards Centre.

● **PAAC Asbestos Fact Pack (1987).** Everything you need to know about asbestos. Available from the People's Asbestos Action Campaign, c/o SCAT, 31 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0AT (£2.00 tenants' associations and trade unions, £3.00 others).

Out of Court – News and views

Kenure Plastics

Kenure Plastics have made a £45,000 out-of-court settlement to 30 of the 42 workers sacked in May last year after refusing to sign contracts for a compulsory 60-hour week (see *Daily Hazard* No.10).

The sacked workers, who had on average been working for five years for Kenure, had taken their case to an industrial tribunal for unfair dismissal. Although Kenure had employed some of the most experienced employment law barristers on the case, they decided to make the offer before the preliminary hearing.

In the circumstances it is a victory for the workers, but the case demonstrates how unfair industrial tribunals are. Workers can rarely match the legal representation that management gets and compensation is based on previous earnings which were minimal for Kenure workers.

Public Order Act

If you think you have a legitimate right to make your feelings public – think again.



The above demonstration took place in 1984. If it were to take place after 1 April 1987 those taking part might find themselves charged with riot (up to ten years' imprisonment), "causing alarm or distress", or "using words, behaviour, writing or images towards someone in such a way that they may think violence will be used against them", or a number of other offences.

The most senior police officer present might believe that the demonstration will cause a serious disruption to community life and might dictate how long it lasts, where it is situated and the number of people attending. Anyone present who then knowingly disobeyed these conditions might find themselves facing a fine of up to £400 and/or three months' imprisonment. You have been warned.

Civil Protection Act

Recent legislation on hazardous emergencies seems to be aimed more at out-manoeuvring Labour local authorities than at dealing with hazards.

The new "all hazards" approach bundles industrial hazards with nuclear war into something called "civil protection". The idea is that precautions against nuclear war are instantly adaptable to tanker spills and factory fires. Or maybe it's the other way round: the glossy literature and video put out by the Home Office are vague, evasive and confused.

The real point is that the Government has been embarrassed by the refusal of Nuclear Free Zone councils to take part in the sham of civil defence against nuclear war.

If preparation for peacetime emergencies and nuclear war are said to be the same, however, a local authority which refuses to play silly war games can be accused of refusing to take seriously its responsibilities for hazardous emergency planning. In addition, the law introduces grant penalties for councils which refuse to toe the "Protect and Survive" line.

Londoners need better protection against industrial accident hazards. But that's not what this law is about.

Enlightenment!

If you want to know all about the hazards of fluorescent lighting in your workplace, then you'll find the new booklet from the London Hazards Centre *Fluorescent Lighting – a Health Hazard Overhead* essential reading.

The booklet details the hazardous characteristics of fluorescent lighting and the effects on health as well as providing a guide to what can be done to improve the lighting in your workplace.

Fluorescent Lighting – A Health Hazard Overhead is available from the London Hazards Centre price including postage £5.00 (£2.00 to trade union and community groups). Please phone the Hazards Centre for discounts on bulk orders.

Race & Hazards Meeting

On 21 May the London Hazards Centre will be holding an open meeting on "Racism, Housing and Health Hazards". It will be a chance for members of the community and housing activists to discuss their experience and relate them to the hazards Black people face owing to bad housing.

We aim to help people organise on hazards issues particularly looking at overcoming obstacles placed by local authorities, tenants associations and independent agencies.

After a brief introduction by the speakers there will be an opportunity for groups from different parts of London to share their experience of how they have succeeded in organising around the issue of hazards.

Black Women & Housing

Conference at Lambeth Town Hall, 30 May 1987. For details contact Blessed on 01-274 7722 ext 2973.



Pesticide ban

Tributyltin (TBT) compounds have been banned from use as pesticides in anti-fouling paints. These paints stop the hulls of boats becoming encrusted with barnacles and weed. The ban is the government's long-overdue reaction to evidence that TBT is drastically affecting marine life in rivers and estuaries.

But the use of TBT oxide as a wood preservative in peoples' homes is still acceptable, says the government. This is despite mounting evidence that TBT is a serious risk to human health. It is a severe irritant, may affect the immune system, and could cause cancer. The Hazards Centre has received a number of calls from people whose health has been badly affected after TBT oxide formulations have been used in their homes.

For more information about pesticide use, subscribe to the *Pesticides Action Bulletin*, newsletter of the London Pesticides Action Group. Details from Frank Slight, Convenor, LPAG, 47 Gaskell Road, London N5.

Halcyon daze – over?

Tenants on a second housing estate in Greenwich have found that they are also at risk from the Halcyon heating system we reported on in our last issue.

In three separate incidents since Christmas, heaters on the **Connaught Estate** have released so much fume that tenants were driven out of their flats. In the worst of these cases, the tenant, getting no response from the council's emergency service, called the Fire Brigade. Firefighters entered the fume-filled flat and turned the system off. The tenant and her eight children were without heating for several days.

Meanwhile on the **Woolwich Common Estate** the Action Group has found many more flats where tenants blame the nearly obsolete gas-fired warm air heaters for ill health in adults and children. Council engineers have been investigating a stream of complaints. In one flat the level of carbon monoxide gas in the heater cupboard was so high

that the needle of the council's test meter went off the dial. The engineer turned the heater off immediately. The tenant is now wondering if fumes from the heating system might have caused her two miscarriages.

Tenants on the two estates are now working together on the problem. Woolwich Common's leaflet is being used on the Connaught. Response to the leaflet will show whether tenants there also suffer from the effects of low-level exposure as well as the more dramatic leaks reported since Christmas. Even when they are not producing harmful fumes the Halcyon types of heater still fail to heat outlying rooms. This is one of the reasons why bedrooms have severe condensation and mould growth. New research at Edinburgh University has confirmed earlier findings of a link between mould growth and a variety of illnesses including diarrhoea in children.

The Hazards Centre's Community Support Group would like to hear from tenants' associations investigating Halcyon heaters.