

THE DAILY HAZARD

POLLUTION SCANDAL I: POISONED LAND

Leaked report blows council cover-up

When Laporte Industries shut their chemical factory at Ilford in 1980, many local residents breathed a sigh of relief. Decades of pollution, foul smells and the threat of explosions were to end. In the event, all Ilford lost was jobs as Laporte cleared out but failed to clean up. Seven years on, the site is contaminated with radiation and chemicals that can cause cancer, allergies and skin complaints.



In 1975, the government's Health and Safety Executive found that management negligence was the cause of an explosion at Laporte's Ilford site. The company was fined £300. Robert Church, an operator at the plant, paid a higher price for this negligence. He was sprayed with caustic soda and killed.

Twelve years after Robert's death, homes and schools are no longer at risk from explosions. And Redbridge Council's Environmental Health Department insists the site is safe. But local residents disagree. 'We've always been told that there's nothing to worry about', said Janet Knight, 'but that's all they'd say, even after the place exploded.' Another resident, Maggie Thomas, believes that

the council is hiding the facts: 'I asked an officer from environmental health how he could say the chemicals were safe and he said: "That information is secret".'

We obtained the 'secret' information from a councillor in the next borough, Barking. Analysts' reports dating back to 1983 show that the site is dangerously contaminated with toxic chemicals including tars and oils, arsenic, vanadium, nickel, lead, mercury and sulphates. Nickel, one of several cancer-causing metals on site, makes up more than 25 per cent of the 'soil' in some places. For comparison, 0.1 per cent would rate as 'gross contamination'. Two per cent would be a high-grade ore.

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POLLUTION SCANDAL II: POISONED WATER

Worms and weedkiller on tap

Little red worms in the bath water, dangerous levels of lead in the coffee from the office vending machines. . . Two recent cases dealt with by the London Hazards Centre show how easily pollution can turn water into a hazard at work and in the home.

In both examples (see box) water was contaminated on the premises. Vigilant trade unions and tenants' associations were able to get supplies cleaned up and insist on better procedures for maintenance and monitoring in future.

But what if the water is already polluted before it reaches your home or workplace? Here we rely for protection on the water authorities, the Department of the Environment (DoE) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). These watchdogs, however, seem unconcerned by rising levels of pollution from

industry and agriculture.

In California, pesticide pollution posed such a threat to the health of rural communities that the State had to pass special legislation - Article 15 - to halt

the use of any pesticide which can leach into the groundwater.

The weedkiller atrazine, cause of a recent water pollution scandal in Italy, is a common contaminant of London's water. The

highest concentration measured by Thames Water Authority (TW) in the last year was 0.47 micrograms per litre ($\mu\text{g/l}$) - nearly five times the limit set by the EEC for any pesticide in drinking water ($0.1\mu\text{g/l}$).

Is this a crime under EEC law? Well, yes. Can we expect a prosecution from the DoE? Well, no. Ian Adams, water quality planning officer at TW, explained that the DoE doesn't like the EEC imposing a uniform limit on all pesticides regardless of toxicity. It has therefore given atrazine an individual limit of $30\mu\text{g/l}$ - 300 times the EEC level. This means that Londoners are not, after all, drinking illegal quantities of weedkiller.

Worms in the sink

Mrs Christine Harper, Chair of Heathside Tenants' Association in Lewisham, was trying to clean the sink in her flat. She couldn't get rid of some stuff which looked like sand. Then she noticed the 'sand' was starting to swim. Later she found numerous small red worms swimming in the water.

Mrs Harper alerted the other tenants, contacted the council's repairs department, took a sample of water, complete with worms, to the environmental health department and phoned the Hazards Centre. After failed attempts at a clean-up, the council had to agree with the Hazards Centre: they ripped out and replaced the filthy and

poorly maintained tanks supplying eight of the flats.

Lead in the drink

Four new drinks vending machines had hardly been installed in a civil service office when they were taken out of service. Safety reps were told that analysis of samples from the machines had shown the water to be contaminated with lead. The Hazards Centre advised that newly-soldered joints in the machines or their plumbing were the most likely source of contamination. Management should be made to look for cadmium as well and to check the purity of the mains supply. The union is still waiting for a full explanation.

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Killing cockroaches, taking control

‘Now 72 per cent of our people are either from West Indian origin or Afro-Caribbean descent... They suffer discrimination in this society, particularly the younger generation... What we have been doing is creating hope for the future, particularly for our younger generation.’

Leonardo Leon, Broadwater Farm Residents' Association



Speakers Paul Ayji and Leonardo Leon, and chair Blessed Modukanele open up a lively discussion

Organising: the obstacles

Some tenants' organisations are directly racist, said Paul Ayji of Greenwich Housing Rights, excluding Black people from participation or ignoring their concerns. In Greenwich, despite active tenants' organisations which aren't directly racist, racist violence imposes a virtual curfew on many Black people, excluding them from activism.

Black tenants may have to organise differently from orthodox TAs, for example in single issue groups or around youth issues.

Organising: successes

Paul's conclusion is borne out by the experience of Broadwater Farm, which the tenants' struggle is transforming from a dump estate into decent homes with proper facilities, jobs and community solidarity. The Youth Association's successes gave the impetus for the replacement of the old racist, inert TA with a new anti-racist, active, democratic organisation which works alongside the Youth Association.

The key to their success, said Leonardo Leon of Broadwater Farm Residents' Association, is the fight to understand and take control of the management of the estate. As an example, he described how they dealt with the estate's cockroach infestation. Through their own survey the tenants had identified this as something that people wanted dealt with. The council agreed and budgeted to spend £100,000 on the whole estate.

‘Today we are fighting cockroaches, but we are not fighting cockroaches but fighting for the right to become ourselves. And our people will see how we have grown – because we have grown. We have been let down – not actually let down – we have been kept down. So we have to build ideas. Cockroaches were one of the best means to put pressure on the council.’

Leonardo Leon, Broadwater Farm Residents' Association

The tenants argued to have quarter of the work done first. Then they would assess the success of the treatment and train people from the estate to carry out the remaining work. A co-op has now been set up to do the rest of the contract and future maintenance, with technical back-up from the environmental health department. In the process, the tenants have learnt how to control infestations. And people on the estate have jobs and training.

Summing up the lessons

What most clearly emerged from the meeting, especially from Broadwater Farm's work, were rules and ideas for organising:

- *fixing on clear physical goals such as facilities or elimination of hazards;*
- *aiming to rebuild people's lives and spirits as well as the physical fabric of the estate;*
- *understanding the council's internal politics and not being manipulated in power struggles between council departments;*
- *collating information from tenant surveys and council documents so as not to have to rely on what council officers say;*
- *going for what is really needed and not being fobbed off with poor substitutes;*
- *having the work of improvement planned, controlled and carried out by local people, generating skills and jobs.*

To which we would like to add: use the London Hazards Centre – it's what we're here for.

Summertime: the heat's on workers

This summer don't put up with an overheated workplace.

The Factories Act (sections 3 and 4) and Offices Shops and Railways Premises Act (sections 6 and 7) say employers *must* make *effective* provision for a *reasonable temperature and for adequate ventilation* with fresh or purified air. Employers have been prosecuted for failing to do this. A thermometer must be prominently displayed.

There is no legal maximum except for potteries, but an employer who does nothing to control unreasonable temperatures is probably breaking the Health and Safety at Work Act. Standards for heat are mostly based on tests on young fit men.

To take all workers into account, one union suggests you should set *maximum* temperatures as follows: Work done **sitting down**: 22.5°C (72°F); **standing, with little movement**: 20°C (68°F); with **some physical effort**: 18°C (64°F).

Over about 24°C (75°F), your alertness drops and you are more likely to have an accident. 26°C (79°F), is definitely unacceptable.

Watch out for signs of heat stress: increased heart rate, fatigue, nausea, headache, giddiness, clammy skin, paleness, fainting, oral temperature above 37.5°C (99.6°F), plus heat rash, and muscle cramps from loss of salt through sweating. Heat puts strain on the heart and people

with heart conditions can be at risk. In very hot conditions kidney damage may occur.

Action you can take

- Negotiate a maximum acceptable temperature *before* the weather gets too hot, not when the crisis hits you.
- Survey 'hot spots'; keep a record of temperatures and workers' complaints.
- Demand that management have a survey done using the *Wet Bulb Globe Temperature (WBGT) Index* which takes account of humidity, air movement and workload.
- Go for properly designed ven-

tilation or air conditioning. Fans do not cool the air above 27°C (80°F). Portable air cooling cabinets can reduce air temperature by up to 6°C (11°F).

- Solar gain (greenhouse effect) from windows can be reduced by reflective film or blinds, and by reducing window area.
- If you have to push to get your demands met, don't let up if the weather cools: the problem will return and you will have lost your impetus.
- As interim measures, consider: hourly rest breaks of at least 15 minutes in fresh air or a cool rest room; cold drinks; local cooling.
- A hot workplace is a hazard: don't stay in it.

Estate sales victims protest

In 1985 the tenants of Bacton Tower in Bethnal Green were moved out into much smaller 'temporary accommodation' so that asbestos could be removed from the block's 53 flats. After two years of patiently waiting they have been told that they will never get their homes back. Tower Hamlets Council has decided to sell the block to private developers.

The tenants of Bacton Tower are among thousands of victims of 'estate sales', the latest trick in the drive by central and local government to privatise housing and unload the financial burden of housing repairs which the Association of Metropolitan Authorities estimates at £20 billion nationally.

The Bacton Tower tenants are

resisting this attempt to steal their homes. Tower Hamlets is trying to sell more than 900 homes. This policy can only add to the 4,000 homeless people in a borough where 1,000 families are in bed and breakfast accommodation, 9,000 are on the waiting list and 10,000 are on the transfer list.

As the well-off buy their way into privatised homes, the poorest people – particularly the borough's large Bengali community – will be concentrated in unsaleable, defective and hazardous housing... That's if they are lucky!... The Council recently decided to evict Bangladeshi homeless families from bed and breakfast accommodation by declaring them 'intentionally homeless'.

The Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign has denounced this as 'An overtly racist policy and a direct attack on the borough's minority communities which is designed to obscure the real housing issue and divide the people of Tower Hamlets on the basis of race and colour. In short it is a recipe for backdoor repatriation'. The Homeless Families Campaign, the Tenants' Federation and the Health Campaign have recently had all their funding cut off by Tower Hamlets Council.

The London Hazards Centre has been giving advice to tenants on hazards and estate sales and privatisation. Asbestos removal is being used as a lever to empty flats scheduled for privatisation but the dangers of asbestos are largely ignored when the estates are not in prime development areas.

The Campaign against Sales of Estates (CASE UK) helps tenants organise nationally by holding meetings and producing very useful newsletters. The Campaign warns that many ostensibly charitable trusts and housing associations are fronts for developers who will allow rents and repair costs to soar.

Contacts: CASE UK c/o SCAT, 31 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1. Tower Hamlets Homeless Families Campaign, c/o Brady Centre, Hanbury Street, E1.



Tower Hamlets tenants demonstrate against heartless housing policies which leave hundreds homeless

Polluted land scandal

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The site is also contaminated with radioactive thorium. This decomposes to radioactive radon gas, which can concentrate in buildings, increasing the occupants' risk of lung cancer. Beneath the site, cyanide, phenols and other chemicals are already in the groundwater.

Children play on the site. Contact with contaminated soil could explain the sickness, rashes and itchy skin reported by their parents. The council has allowed archaeologists to dig pits in the safer 'safe' areas. The less safe 'safe' areas are protected by potentially lethal razor wire.

Whithorn Limited now have planning permission to develop the site for housing. Residents fear that building work could

spread pollution to the nearby school and houses.

Redbridge Council remains secretive about the contamination and any plans it may have for removing it before homes are built. When 300 local residents packed a school hall meeting, the council barred its officers from attending. And when the site came up on the agenda for a council meeting and 70 residents filled the public gallery, the chair dismissed the item without discussion.

'We are going to get to the bottom of this, we're incensed by the council palming us off with bland reassurances', said Janet Knight. 'We want the site cleared, but we want to be consulted to make sure it's done safely.'

Campaigners pack conference

Sheffield provided the venue for the third **National Conference of the Peoples Asbestos Action Campaign**. Organisation of asbestos victims was the main theme and the conference was well attended despite the severe ill health of many of the victims.

Workshops were held on a range of asbestos issues: dumping, schools, the workplace, estates, removal and monitoring, and organising the labour movement. The main part of the conference was a forum on victims' rights and needs. The conference resolved to:

- develop training programmes for welfare rights workers and advisers who deal with compensation claims;

Asbestos blunders

- Camden Council successfully prosecuted a local carpet firm under the Health and Safety at Work Act for the illegal removal of asbestos lagging. Following an inspection by Camden Environmental Health, the warehouse of B and R Carpets was issued with an improvement notice on asbestos lagged pipes. The firm proceeded to use an unlicensed contractor to remove the asbestos, who left massive contamination. The company were fined £3,000 and it cost them £10,000 to clean up.

- Thompsons Laboratories, well known in the asbestos monitoring field, have released results of a survey of equipment used by licensed removal contractors. The results show a high degree of negligence and lack of supervision:

38% of sites had no decontamination unit

23% of sites had no negative pressure unit

19% of sites had no adequate sheeting or airlocks

22% of sites had no warning signs

78% of sites had no barriers to delimit the contractor's compound

- help to form support groups where asbestos victims can meet regularly.

Clydeside Action on Asbestos formed the first support group last November and have over 80 active members, partial funding and an office.

Any asbestos victims or their friends and trade union colleagues who would like to help organise a southern victims support group please write to PAAC via the London Hazards Centre.



Asbestos victims speak out at the National PAAC conference

Dangers displayed

'I've worked on a VDU for four years now and feel I've aged ten years! I feel constantly tired and only start to unwind on Sunday which gives me half a day's rest each week because I start to get keyed up again during Sunday evening.'

VDU worker writing to the London Hazards Centre, quoted from the newly published *VDU Hazards Handbook*.

Nearly five million British workers spend their days glued to a VDU screen, and their number is growing daily. Few know the facts about VDU hazards, but many are starting to worry.

How does VDU work affect your eyesight? What can be done to prevent strain injuries? Can exposure to VDUs cause abnormal pregnancies? How much radiation do VDUs give out? What diseases are linked to VDU work? These are some of the questions to which VDU workers are beginning to demand answers.

Here at last is a comprehensive guide to how VDU work affects your health and what to do about it. From radiation hazards to repetition strain injuries, from headaches to heart attacks, from miscarriages to migraines, the *VDU Hazards Handbook* brings together research from all over the world to give the facts in clear, non-technical language.

The handbook also suggests realistic ways for workers to pro-



tect their health and their rights. The handbook shows how new technology changes your working life, and how workers can control those changes by organising. As part of this, it discusses the reasons why employers introduce new technology, and how their priorities can damage your health.

Guidance on choosing the best equipment and software is included together with information on designing safer jobs and a safer working environment. We hope this 200-page handbook will find its way into every workplace which uses VDUs.

VDU Hazards Handbook - A worker's guide to the effects of new technology by Ursula Huws for the London Hazards Centre. Order from the Centre at £5.45 including p&p. Discount for more than 10 copies.

Camden, Brent and Hackney take up pesticides push

Negotiations to control the use of pesticides in London's parks and gardens are now taking place in several boroughs. We have previously reported on initiatives taken by NUPE and TGWU branches in Haringey, Waltham Forest and Islington to draw up *Codes of Practice for the Safe Use of Chemicals*, to take stock of what chemicals are lying around in stores, to negotiate a limited list of 'safe' chemicals, and to use non-chemical methods of pest and weed control wherever possible.

Camden NUPE's Gardeners' Shop Stewards Committee did an inventory of all pesticides stored or used in the parks and gardens, and found that of 39 different pesticides - including

DDT and paraquat - only eight were sufficiently safe to use.

In Brent, where use of 2,4-D has recently been banned, the union is now negotiating a statement of intent to minimise the use of chemicals and a no-carcinogens clause, drawing on agreements already successfully negotiated by Islington NUPE.

In Hackney, the TGWU and NUPE are taking action on the use of primatol, which contains simazine and aminotriazole.

● **Aminotriazole** is the chemical featured in the *Pesticides Action Bulletin*, newsletter of the London Pesticides Action Group. For subscription details, contact: Frank Slight, Convenor, LPA, 47 Gaskell Road, London N5.

Resources

Asbestos cement roofs

Asbestos cement is the only building material still permitted to be made with asbestos. The asbestos industry pretends it is safe, but the deadly fibres are easily released by any disturbance or weathering.

If you have it, get rid of it. The Centre has drawn up a procedure for safe removal of asbestos cement roofs.

Asbestos cement: suggested method of work for safe demolition, from London Hazards Centre, free with SAE.

Thinking ahead

Death at Work. This pamphlet is the Work Hazards Group's contribution to the labour movement debate on a serious national health and safety programme.

It pulls together the grim information on government's and employers' responsibility for death and injury at work - up 30 per cent under the 'law and order' Conservatives. It describes a programme of funda-

mental legal reform which, if backed by funds and enforcement, might change things. Alongside this, it outlines a programme of organisation for the hazards and labour movement to make better use of what resources it has and what little leverage the present law provides.

Death at Work by the Work Hazards Group, published by WEA, available from the Hazards Centre. £1.25.

Hazards are transnational

Hazardous Industries, Dangerous Work is one of nine educational packs produced by International Labour Reports specifically for trade unionists.

The articles examine the Bhopal disaster; moving hazardous industries to the 'Third World'; and alternative jobs for workers in the nuclear and weapons industries.

The pack shows that hazards are not just a technical issue but a political issue on an international scale which requires an international response from trade unionists.

Available from ILR, 2-4 Oxford Road, Manchester M1. £13.40 for 10.

Southwark in July

If you live or work in Southwark, watch for **Southwark Trade Union Week** which will be publicising health and safety at work and home.

The week will also launch a health and safety information pack aimed at small workplaces, written by the Hazards Centre for Southwark Council.

● **Southwark Trade Union Week, 13-19 July.** Public meeting Walworth Town Hall, Weds 15 July. Contact Southwark Trade Union Support Unit, 582 0996.

● **Health and safety pack:** Southwark trade union reps should contact Southwark Council Employment and Training, East House, Southwark Town Hall, Peckham Road, SE5; 703 6311 x2147.



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