

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## Conference calls for Hazards '88 campaign

Five hundred trade union safety representatives and health and safety activists packed out the conference to organise the fight against hazards at work and at home. The call was loud and clear for action to stop the tragedy of 700 workplace killings and 20,000 deaths from occupational diseases each year.

The conference saw the launch of a powerful campaign against the horrific toll of deaths and accidents that the present government has sent rocketing. Since 1979 it has slashed the Factory Inspectorate by 20 per cent and presided over industry's soaring 35 per cent increase in major and fatal accidents, with a horrific 50 per cent increase in accidents in the construction industry.

Conference delegates were determined that the strength and

commitment shown at the conference should be channelled into a high profile national campaign, **Hazards '88**. The campaign is to involve activists at work and in the community, as well as the trade unions and Labour Party.

Shadow Employment Secretary Michael Meacher spoke out at the conference: **'There is a law and order crisis sweeping Britain today which the Tories totally ignore - the wholesale evasion of health and safety law'**. He slammed the **'... absolutely derisory'** fines on bosses who gamble with the lives of their employees; he also called for prison sentences for those whose negligence caused deaths. Michael Meacher pledged that the Labour Party intends to make health and safety a major political issue.

Dave Gee, GMB's National Health and Safety Officer highlighted the cuts in Factory Inspectors as a serious problem. More crucial, however, was the lack of enforcement and paltry penalties that guilty employers can easily shrug off.

**'There is no incentive to comply with the law when the average workplace only sees an inspector once every eight or nine years and a fine for the death of a worker averages £500. Until the killing of workers through gross negligence is seen as manslaughter, workers' lives will continue to be thrown away.'**

● **Hazards '88** will involve activists from all round the country. If you're interested in being involved, contact the Work Hazards Group c/o London Hazards Centre.



Full house at 'Living Dangerously' 2nd National Hazards Conference

## Council office workers endure lousy treatment

The London Hazards Centre was contacted by Southwark NALGO's Health and Safety Officer following concern that office workers in Southwark Council Treasurer's Department had been exposed to the pesticide bendiocarb.

After numerous complaints of pest infestations, management arranged for pesticide treatments to be carried out. An initial, unsuccessful attempt using cypermethrin was made to rid the offices of the resident fleas, ants, booklice and silverfish. Without consulting the staff, and apparently without considering its likely effectiveness or toxicity, management's next step was to spray the offices with bendiocarb.

When the Hazards Centre inspected the offices it became clear that pest infestation and treatment was only one of many

health and safety problems that had been contributing to workers' ill health.

The lowest paid workers were found occupying a basement room that was originally intended for storage. Another basement room designated for use by the Borough Treasurer workers had been made unin-



Gloomy, poorly ventilated basements make unhealthy offices

habitable by damp. Attempts to dry it out with a small electric fan were unsuccessful.

Supplying the basement with enough fresh air proved almost impossible. Whenever the windows were opened the office was polluted by dust, dirt, exhaust fumes from the main road and noise.

In response to complaints of over-heating, breathing difficulties, headaches and general ill-health, a mechanical ventilation system was installed. But, partly because of bad design, a new set of problems arrived, including eye irritation, sore and dry throats, flu-like symptoms, draughts and fluctuating temperatures. Workers decided that this solution was worse than the original problem and the system was switched off.

Damp and water penetration, pest infestations, inadequate lighting, poor space and layout, excessive noise levels, fire hazards, and unsatisfactory temperature, ventilation and humidity control have been recurrent problems since work-

ers were put in this 'temporary' accommodation eight years ago. It is an environment much more suited to booklice, fleas, ants, rats, and silverfish than council workers.

The Council has for some time accepted that the basement is the least desirable accommodation in the department and in principle have agreed to relocate the section. While one worker is in hospital suffering from suspected pesticide poisoning, the question being asked by management about the move is not when, or how, but how much it will cost.

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## Limitations in Government pesticide vetting scheme exposed

# MAFF swallows Cyanamid's tale

Recent work by the Centre has exposed – yet again – the gaping holes in the way pesticides are scrutinised for approval in the UK, and how these faults are cloaked under the pretext of protecting ‘commercially sensitive’ information. And it looks as if the ‘reformed’ scheme just coming into force will be little better.

The latest story begins when the Centre set out to research a weedkiller called arsenal. Arsenal is based on a chemical called imazapyr which was developed by the US company Cyanamid in the early 1980s. Cyanamid claims it is very good at killing plants, and virtually harmless to people, animals, soil and water supplies.

Computer searches established that the studies on which Cyanamid based their claims were not published in the scientific journals. Cyanamid, through the UK company Chipman, refused to release them to us – ‘commercial confidentiality’ again.

The UK Committee's reasons

for accepting Cyanamid's claims are summarised in under a page of the MAFF Advisory Committee on Pesticides' 1984 Annual Report. And it took the Ministry three months to respond to our request for information.

**‘AC 243,997 [arsenal] was relatively persistent in soil, was adsorbed readily and did not leach.’**

MAFF Advisory Committee on Pesticides Annual Report 1984

But we had discovered that arsenal is banned in the State of California. So we wrote to the State government to find out why.

In the United States there is a Freedom of Information Act. We ended up with 26 pages of scientific memos and reports showing exactly how and why California rejected arsenal: ‘... its rate of accumulation in the environment, its potential for leaching into groundwater and its persistence in soil’.

By April 1987 Cyanamid had still not put forward even a

method to test leaching, let alone produced data, which satisfied the state's environmental scientists.

A year before California started asking awkward questions, the UK Advisory Committee had accepted that arsenal ‘did not leach’ into groundwater – from presumably the very same or even less information.

**‘Registration cannot be recommended at this time unless applicant submits more reasonable data to prove that leaching is not an environmental concern.’**

Registration Chemist, California Department of Food and Agriculture, September 1985

Sooner or later imazapyr and all other pesticides registered under the old *Pesticides Safety Precautions Scheme* will come for re-evaluation under the *Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986*, made under the *Food and Environment Protection Act*. The re-evaluation data will, says the ministry, be accessible.

But re-evaluating all currently registered chemicals will take 50 years unless MAFF is given proper staffing, according to the Institution of Professional Civil Servants.

In fact you may not be allowed to see anything more than brief, company-vetted summaries without satisfying MAFF of the ‘scientific justification’ for your request. Copies are not supplied without company permission: you have to go to a reading room at the ministry. Unauthorised publication of information will lead to prosecution. The manufacturing company is told of your interest. And the faces which appeared on the old committee, we're informed, will still control the show.

**‘From the limited information available to me... it is possible that imazapyr could leach in to groundwater given the right circumstances.’**

Water Technical Division, Department of the Environment, June 1987

## Workers initiate health schemes

Cancer, heart and lung diseases caused by work kill thousands every year. Other diseases, including backpain, repetition strain injuries and industrial deafness, can ruin the quality of life. Many more workers die of occupational diseases than are killed in workplace accidents. Last month, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) declared occupational health a priority area and the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) set up a committee to advise on occupa-

tional health issues.

‘The commission has always encouraged employers to introduce occupational health services wherever possible’, announced Dr John Cullen, Chair of the HSC, at the first meeting of its Occupational Health Advisory Committee. This encouragement has been strikingly ineffective. Nearly nine out of ten firms have no occupational health service excepting ‘a rather scant provision by first aiders’ according to a House of Lords survey.

Many trade union safety activists are sceptical about the motives of employers who do introduce these services. British Steel in Corby sells its occupational health services to local businesses. Last year a report revealed that their principal selling point was ‘... ensuring that employees lose a minimum time off the job. There would be no interest from small companies in a service based solely around the provision of occupational health and hygiene advice, as there are no obvious benefits’.

In the Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, released last month, David Eves admits: ‘Occupational health should be as important... as safety, but it is frequently not recognised as a problem of any immediacy’.

John Lawson was employed as a fettler at British Steel's River Don works for over eight years. ‘Conditions weren't good’, he reflects, ‘they were absolutely atrocious’. In 1979, John and a couple of other active trade unionists, set up Sheffield Occupational Health Project (SOHP). ‘Basically we just sit down in the doctor's waiting room and talk to the patients,

about their working background, jobs they've worked at... conditions they've worked in and materials worked with’ explained Cliff Wright, another ex-British Steel worker now with the project. ‘Looking for the conditions and materials that do damage to workers' health.’

John sees many workers from his old firm among those they've identified as suffering obstructive airways disease or other problems arising from exposure to dust at work. ‘British Steel must have known about these cases, but they treated every case as individuals – “casualties”. The information was not disseminated to the shop floor.’ Now, together with the Trade Union Safety Committee, SOHP arrange public meetings to ensure more people are made aware of the hazards.

The lesson of SOHP is that it is workers themselves that have the expertise to uncover and combat workplace hazards and, particularly, occupational disease. Dr Cullen and Mr Eves could learn a lot from a visit to Sheffield.

● Report of Chief Inspector of Factories. 1986-87. HMSO.

### BHOPAL THIRD ANNIVERSARY TORCHLIGHT VIGIL

To press for justice for Bhopal's people.  
Wednesday 2nd December, 2.00–7.00pm  
Indian High Commission, Aldwych, London WC2  
Details from Bhopal Support Group:  
Aperna Sundar, 01-458 8661

### SPEAKERS AND EXHIBITION

Thursday 3rd December, 6.00pm  
ICA, Carlton Street, London SW1



## Estate sales

# Selling off safety

Waterlow Estate, owned by Tower Hamlets has been handed over to Barratts for refurbishment and selling off. Of 386 flats only 90 will be kept for Tower Hamlets tenants. The remaining beleaguered tenants on the estate are under threat of eviction, and have been exposed to asbestos during conversion work.

Barratts contractors have ripped asbestos from flats and thrown it into open skips in the road which is used not only by residents but as a route to local schools by hundreds of children.

Asbestos and eviction are not the only worry for locals; the construction site itself is far from safe. The Hazards Centre visited the site and noted the following major areas of concern:

- Pavements open to public access were blocked by metal sheets, masonry and equipment.
- There was inadequate fencing of the site which any curious child could circumvent.
- There was inadequate protection of the public from falling objects.
- Excessive dust levels were generated during stone cutting,

processes being carried out in the street and uncovered skips receiving rubble from chutes.

- There were excessively high noise levels from street work.
- There was rusted and badly maintained scaffolding.
- The failure to survey prior to demolition had led to widespread pollution by asbestos and other hazardous substances.



LONDON ASBESTOS ACTION CAMPAIGN

The Hazards Centre advised the tenants to contact the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to request an inspection of the site as a matter of urgency. Despite its being the week of the 'London Construction Safety Blitz' by the Inspectorate, they failed to respond. In fact, not one site in Tower Hamlets was visited by the 'blitz' team.

Tenants and owners of the new flats have formed a **Waterlow Action Group** and are now joining forces with governors from the local school to ensure that neither the asbestos nor the dangers of the site are swept under the carpet. Tower Hamlets is denying responsibility for the estate and blaming the contractors. Tenants want an end to privatisation of estates in the borough, particularly as it creates such dangerous environments and loss of homes for local tenants.

**Left:**  
Rubbish chute poised above open skip and pavement. How safe is this passer-by?

## Law and order

# Fare cop shows up HSE

**'In the past six months we've put forward over 1,700 names for prosecution . . . the reason we have so much success is that we've done a lot of research and have identified areas of high risk'.**

Over 500 inspectors combing the capital, working diligently to rid our streets of criminals. Well, roads and Underground, actually – this is the prosecution record of London Transport, hot in pursuit of fare-dodgers. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), charged with policing hazardous workplaces, seem less keen to see criminal employers brought to justice. 20,000 people are seriously injured at work each year, 700 die – more than two thirds managements' fault. The HSE takes just 1,100 prosecutions in an average year.

London Transport launched 'Artful Dodger' – its drive to cut down on fare-dodging – in May this year. **'We generally prosecute all genuine offenders. The major punishment is the criminal record – it has a high deterrent value',** a representative explained to the Hazards Centre. Posters on tube platforms drive the message home, **'If you evade your fare on the Buses or Tube you could be fined £400 or more – and get a criminal record – something that could affect you for the rest of your life'.** In 1985, the average fine for employers whose criminal negligence caused death or serious injury to a worker was similar, just £473.

So why are the 500 plus HSE inspectors more reticent than the 500 plus London Transport inspectors? And why are penalties for murder and maiming in the workplace so trivial? Could it be that HSE inspectors are still constrained by a recent Chief Inspector of Factories concern that they should: **'consider the cost to industry of their actions in the light of the economic climate'?** Or could it be that London Transport stands to save some of the £50 million it loses to fare-dodgers each year. The same enthusiasm from the HSE could, at best, save lives.

## Training schemes

# Young, injured and dead

**'What have you got to lose?'** is the advertising slogan for the Government's work-for-your-dole Job Training Scheme (JTS).

Job Centres have already

placed nearly 20,000 people on the scheme, designed for 18-25 year olds who have been unemployed for more than six months. They receive only their benefit, so although they come off the unemployment figures they are still claimants and do not have employee status. This denies them employment rights, and for the purposes of health and safety legislation they are treated as members of the public, rather than as employees.

Since 1983, 16 and 17 year olds on the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) have been designated by the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) as being protected by the Health and Safety At Work Act in its entirety. The HSC designation order was provoked by harsh public criticism of shocking safety standards on YTS. *Since 1978, at least 44 young people have been killed while working on Youth Opportunities Placement Scheme (YOPS) and YTS, with over 1,500 injuries leading to over 100*

*amputations.* You will not find these statistics in the Government's slick advertising campaigns.

The HSE has rejected calls for an immediate extension of cover for people on JTS, despite the fact that there is little difference between YTS and JTS. They are both large schemes, using young inexperienced people, working in potentially dangerous environments.

An HSE spokesman said: **'As far as the HSE is concerned, we did not think there was any point whatsoever in making the regulations extending cover for YTS trainees in 1983. We do not see the point in extending it to JTS now'.**

The latest YTS accident figures reflect their complacent attitude. *In the past year ending May 1987, there have been nine deaths, 315 major accidents and a horrific 54 per cent increase in minor accidents.*

With one YTS death every six weeks, it looks like JTS workers may have a great deal to lose.



**This trainee collapsed from exposure to solvent fumes**



## UCATT chemicals case shows the dangers of wood preservatives

# Sick woodworkers fear treatment

Chemical wood preservatives are exacting a heavy toll on the lives and health of the workers applying them. The Government continues to defend these pesticides. Now the Union of Construction Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) is challenging official complacency, determined to uncover the true extent of the problem.

In one small, local authority timber-treatment shed, where windows were boarded over and ventilation was restricted, 14 UCATT members were exposed to the wood preservatives pentachlorophenol (PCP), lindane ( $\gamma$  HCH) and tributyltin oxide (TBTO). Two died of cancer – one was in his 50s, the other, his apprentice, was 23. Of the remaining workers, one has a withered leg and eight have acute symptoms affecting breathing, stomach and skin. The union is now taking legal action.

This case is one of many referred to the Hazards Centre in

recent months, involving the treatment of timber with preservatives prior to its installation in homes. Other affected workers, not protected by a union and scared of victimisation, are reluctant to disclose their identity. One group, pre-treating timbers and sawing and assembling roof trusses, put an anonymous call through to the Centre in March. Their employer had given them no information, except an assurance that the chemicals were 'totally safe'. The workers' health told a different story: **'We all suffer headaches and sore throats. Two men got it splashed on their arms and all the skin came off . . . none of us can get on any more. We used to be good mates'.**

Another worker, employed by 'a large construction company' in the West Country, also put through an anonymous call. He told the Centre that a doctor from the Employment Medical Advisory Service had found high levels of PCP in workers' urine.

## Boring pests and all that rot

It's not a shortage of chemicals that allows rot and infestations to attack wood, but poor maintenance and design. A chemical treatment is often the last thing you need to remedy a problem.

**Wood boring pests:** Only common furniture beetle, deathwatch beetle and house longhorn beetle can cause weakening to structural timber. Humans can happily cohabit with woodworm, wood weevil and other beetles. Detect infestations early through regular building inspection and maintenance, before indiscriminate use of chemicals is required. Wood borers abandon wood – make sure the infestation is still active before considering treating timber.

**Dry rot:** needs moisture/poor ventilation to develop. Can spread rapidly. Cut off the source of the moisture (damaged pipes, bridged damp proof course etc) and increase ventilation (clean airbricks etc) and the growth will cease as the building fabric dries.

**Wet rot:** needs persistently wet wood. Proper maintenance and decoration stops wet rot developing. Slow spreading, dies if wood dried.

**Chemical hazards:** avoid Pentachlorophenol (PCP), Lindane ( $\gamma$  HCH), Tributyltin oxide (TBTO) and Dieldrin. Many others in common usage are also hazardous – ask for a Manufacturers' Hazard Data Sheet.

He alleged: **'there was a cover up'** and that **'the HSE was told not to prosecute'**. Then, obviously distressed, he rang off.

PCP, lindane, TBTO and a host of other highly toxic compounds capable of causing seri-

ous disease all appear in the HSE's list of approved pesticides. The HSE maintain: **'There is no reason to take any of them off the list'**. But UCATT fear that many of the products approved are inadequately vetted: **'They tell us they do not have the time to check everything that has an HSE number. Some of the substances they have passed are horrifying'**, said an official. Now it's hoped that the suffering revealed by a detailed survey of the union's 200,000 members will convince the authorities that these substances are just too dangerous to use.

## 2000 NEEDLESS DEATHS EVERY YEAR

# Cancer screening fails test

There are recent encouraging signs that by campaigning for workplace screening facilities trade unions are helping the fight to prevent the 2,000 plus unnecessary deaths each year from cervical cancer.

Ninety per cent of cervical cancer deaths are preventable if the disease is picked up early by a smear test. Workplace screening has been shown to be particularly effective in reaching working class women who would not otherwise have the test.

Despite the proven value of smear testing, the National Health screening service has been consistently under-resourced and the Women's National Cancer Control Campaign stated recently that: **'the cervical cancer screening programme is a potential shambles'** and **'the system has not worked so far and it is not working now'**.

Cancer of the cervix is also a workplace hazard issue. Although many reports have focused on the link between

women's sexual 'history' and the disease, there is increasing evidence to show that the male partners' occupation may be significant and that women whose partners work in 'dirty' indus-

tries such as mining, foundries, leather, construction and transport are at greater risk of developing cervical cancer than partners of men doing white collar jobs.

## INFORMATION SOURCES AND RESOURCES ON CERVICAL CANCER

**Cancer screening can save your life – a GMB guide to cervical and breast cancer screening.** GMB, Thorne House, Ruxley Ridge, Claygate, Esher, Surrey. £0.50.

**Behind the screen: Cervical cancer.** ASTMS, 79 Camden Road, London NW1 9ES.

**Union pressure wins workplace screening.** In: Bargaining Report 47 (January 1986), Labour Research Department, 78 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HF. £2.65.

**Cervical cancer is a trade union issue.** Southall Trade Union Employment Advisory Service, 14 Featherstone Road, Southall, Middlesex. Available in English, Urdu and Punjabi. Free.

**Cervical Cancer Broadsheet.** Southwark Trade Union Support Unit, 42 Braganza Street, London SE17 3RJ. Free.

**Women's health and cervical cancer.** Women's Health Information Centre, 52 Featherstone Street, London EC1.

**Cervical cancer screening, what facilities and where.** Greater London Trade Union Resource Unit, Caxton House, 13-14 Borough Road, London SE1.

**Cardiff cancer screening project.** Council for Civil Service Unions (CCSU), 58 Rochester Row, London SW1. Report available soon.

**Women's National Cancer Control Campaign.** 1 South Audley Street, London W1Y 5DQ.

## New worker

Kath Jones joined the Centre on 1 November as one of our two information workers. Kath previously worked at Wolverhampton Trade Union Education Centre and has been an organiser and safety rep in the CPSA.



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