

THE DAILY HAZARD

Cuts prolong asbestos hazard in homes, schools and transport

Systematic decay

When the wind blows on Willowbrook Estate, Peckham, the walls shake and asbestos fibre levels in the flats shoot up. The 25 year old estate is full of asbestos panelling which needs urgent removal.

From the street Willowbrook looks derelict, with windows and balconies covered in rotting



Outside: wood, cement and asbestos crumble

boards. The risk of asbestos contamination prevents repairs. In some flats the window panels are so rotten that the whole wall moves with a touch of the hand.

Tests on a windy day revealed a horrifying 0.02 fibres per millilitre of air (f/ml) in a number of flats, without any obvious damage or disturbance to the asbestos.

The exception is the 12 homes where the tenants' fight to improve the estate has achieved a stunning reminder of what can be done with run down system-build. For £26,000 per unit, and with total tenant participation in all aspects of design, the refurbished flats are warm, dry and attractive. Ugly cold bridging balconies have been made into larger rooms, and pitched roofs and properly fitting double glazed windows conserve heat.

Southwark Council has promised to complete ten more flats but has abandoned the remaining 190, claiming lack of money. Asbestos removal would cost some £1.5m and total refurbishment about £12m. Surveyors estimate that a delay of two years

will add another £5m. Meanwhile the Department of the Environment continues to cut funds for housing repairs.

The tenants of Willowbrook intend to force Southwark Council to finish the job. They hope to link up with other Southwark tenants, and are bringing cases under the Public Health Act.



Inside: asbestos dust blows through rot-holes

We hope tenants faced with similar problems will contact the Hazards Centre both for advice and as a way of linking up groups fighting the same battles.

Fibres in the smoke

Will the public inquiry into the King's Cross tragedy ask wider questions about the everyday hazards like asbestos faced by London Regional Transport's (LRT) passengers and staff?

During the King's Cross fire the ticket hall ceiling which was made from asbestos tiles either exploded in the intense heat or fell and smashed. Tests carried out much later showed asbestos fibre levels in the air above the environmental action level. Many ticket halls and tunnels in the system are still asbestos clad.

LRT's asbestos removal scheme began in 1983 and has a budget of £500,000 a year, nowhere near enough for a coherent programme. Stations earmarked for refurbishment are getting priority, rather than the most dangerous sites. On the Central Line "refurbishment"

There is a maintenance time bomb ticking away: on present plans Local Authorities will not have the resources to defuse it. Systems-built schools will simply fall down.

Audit Commission Local Authority Property, February 1988

Schools timebomb

The Audit Commission Report warns the government of the dangers of letting the nation's schools decay. These projections do not even begin to take into account the asbestos crisis.

Children living on the Willowbrook Estate are likely to go to schools such as Ernest Bevin. The school and the estate were built in an era when asbestos was used in every possible part of the structure.

The ILEA has cut the asbestos removal budget back to £4.3m leaving no hope for schools such as Ernest Bevin, which despite air tests showing contamination 33 times the acceptable limit, has had its removal programme put on ice. Ernest Bevin school is in Wandsworth which intended to "opt out" of the ILEA even

before its abolition was announced by the government for 1990. Yet in debating the transfer there has been no mention of the £55m needed to remove asbestos from Wandsworth schools.

- To remove asbestos from all ILEA schools will cost £500-600m
- To remove asbestos from an average primary school costs £0.5m
- To remove asbestos from an average secondary school costs £0.8m
- ILEA asbestos removal budget for 1987 was £7m
- ILEA asbestos removal budget for 1988 is £4.3m.

The plans to disband the ILEA will only make the control of asbestos in schools worse. Only a quarter of the survey of schools is completed and the system of removal is in chaos. Unless the government follows the US model of a special fund the problem will never be adequately tackled.

Action needed:

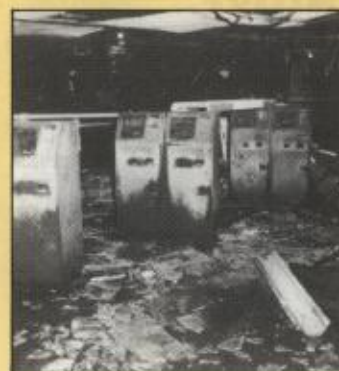
- Speed up surveys by keeping an efficient and trained survey team in constant service
- Make surveys simple and easy to read
- Provide an emergency team for dealing with disturbed asbestos
- Effective management of all remaining asbestos - six monthly checks for damage until removal

INSIDE

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Deadly debris, invisible dust

has meant covering up old wiring and asbestos panels with plastic, creating new fire risks.

The inquiry verdict will not be reached for some months, but one lesson is already clear: safety on the tube needs planning, money and staff, not cash limits and staff cuts.

Invisible Workers

Cleaners



ROBIN A. FORBES

Cleaners' spirits were revived by International entertainment

Last November saw a historic event in London, the first **International Cleaners' Conference**. Cleaners and their representatives came from France, Spain, Germany, Belgium, Holland and Britain to share experiences of exploitation and exchange ideas for further organisation. A recurrent theme was the hazard of racism to migrant workers and the fear many have of speaking out. These workers felt "invisible" and urged the unions to work more closely with migrant worker groups.

The Hazards Centre ran a workshop on health and safety and the demands that came from it were included in a **Cleaners' Charter** drawn up during the day.

The conference helped to link up those working for the same multinational companies in different countries and another conference is planned for next year. An impressive amount was achieved, yet the day was also festive, with food, music and drama from different migrant organisations.

Training for all

Women workers in Ealing and Islington have started to organise against the hazards involved in doing social services and manual work for local authorities.

In Ealing a one day conference run by the Women's Unit and the Hazards Centre enabled shop stewards to identify the dangers of jobs such as home and residential care, caretaking and gardening. They pinpointed the management failures which cause many of their problems and drew up a plan of action. One of the areas highlighted was the need for appropriate training, especially on health and safety.

Residential care, home care and cleaning are some of the areas where it is assumed that workers don't need job training, information on the hazards of their work, or procedures for reporting accidents and injuries. This is because men often see the work as easy and unskilled as it is usually done by women.

In addition, councils put the needs of the clients before their duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to provide all employees with safe working conditions.

● Care assistants in a residential home were concerned about the risks of being exposed to infectious diseases but were told that protective clothing – masks, overalls, and gloves – should not be worn because clients would not like the staff to look like nurses.

● Home care workers complained about the isolation of working out in the community and facing hazards for which their employer would not accept responsibility; for example, dangerous cleaning chemicals, exposure to faecal contamination and infectious diseases and risk of assault.

Stewards demanded:

○ That the council provide effective induction courses and regular training for all manual workers in consultation with the trade unions

○ That the unions promote health and safety awareness among all members

○ That the trade unions ensure that safety reps are elected and trained.

Islington NUPE and the Hazards Centre recently put on a two day health and safety course for stewards. Training on the rights of safety reps, and in identifying and dealing with hazards was put to immediate use when the stewards inspected two residential homes on the second day. They are now awaiting a management response to their reports.

The Hazards Centre is working with home care stewards in Islington to prepare health and safety information geared to the needs of their members. With the growth in community care, the range of clients is increasing and workers' rights need to be protected. A mass meeting of home carers confirmed the need for health and safety training and a course is now being planned.

Unemployed adults beware

The government has decided to change the name of its 20,000 place Job Training Scheme and expand it to the 600,000 place **New Adult Training Programme**, to start in September this year. Unemployed adults will go through new *availability for work tests and re-start interviews*, losing their benefits if they refuse the "offer" of a place. Workers on the 40 hour a week scheme will receive their benefit entitlements plus a pathetic £10 a week for work expenses.

These 600,000 workers will come off the unemployment figures, but will still be claimants without employee status or employment rights. Under considerable pressure from labour movement organisations the

HSE has published draft proposals for extending the 1983 Youth Training Scheme (YTS) regulations to the new scheme, so that trainees on all schemes will be treated as employees for the purposes of the Health and Safety at Work Act (HSWA).

Those running schemes will have to meet the employers' duties under HSWA section 2, to provide safe plant and systems of work; information, instruction, training and supervision necessary to health and safety; safe means of access and exits; and a safe and healthy working environment.

However, a look at the accident rates on YTS shows that the 1983 legislation was a hollow victory. Statistics show the fatal and

major accident rate on YTS of 102 per 100,000 workers is higher than in the manufacturing or shipbuilding industries. YTS deaths average one every six weeks.



FORMAT

YTS worker, what future?

Despite this horrifying record, only a tiny fraction (0.15 per cent) of YTS premises are closed or not allowed trainees because of hazards. Further glar-

Squandered Youth – YTS accident rates

July–September 1986:

0 deaths
77 major injuries
266 minor injuries

July–September 1987:

1 death
109 major injuries
606 minor injuries

ing anomalies remain. YTS workers are not entitled to DHSS industrial injury benefits. Nor are they included in the count of employees for fire certificate requirements.

Only two per cent of YTS trainees are trade union members, leaving the rest without valuable support and health and safety training. If there are YTS trainees in your workplace use the TUC booklet *Protecting young people at work* to help recruit them and protect their rights.

Wood preservatives are powerful pesticides for killing the fungi and insects which can attack exposed or neglected timber.

For its first hundred years the timber preservation industry was confined almost entirely to the pre-treatment of wood for outdoor use. Railway sleepers, telegraph poles and marine piles were impregnated with metal salts,

creosote and, from the 1930s onwards, arsenic.

Only in the last 40 years, with the mass production of synthetic insecticides, fungicides and organic solvents, has wood preservation come indoors, to spray the places where people live and work.

This "remedial treatment" business has grown fat on the rot and

decay produced by system-building and the spending cuts which prevent maintenance, rebuilding or the construction of new homes. As house prices soar, building societies routinely demand guarantees of timber treatment to preserve their investments against the slightest risk. Today, hundreds of wood preservation companies place around

100 tons of toxic chemicals a year in an estimated 100,000 buildings, endangering workers and members of the public. Anyone can join this profitable trade. There is no licensing system and no compulsory code of practice. Many of the chemicals approved by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) are banned or restricted in other countries.

Chemicals which protect property but make humans ill

All the chemicals used in timber treatment are chosen to be toxic and "persistent". They cannot be harmless to humans at the same time. Many can poison through the skin as well as through the lungs and digestive system. People can become ill after handling treated timber, or by breathing spray mist, vapour, contaminated dust or sawdust, or by eating food that has been in contact with wood preservatives.

Several of the most commonly used chemicals cause cancer, allergy, nerve damage or birth defects (see box). Some have killed. Effects may take some time to develop and as they are not always obvious, sufferers and doctors may not relate them to chemical exposure.

Victims include workers in pre-treatment plants, remedial work and building, people whose homes and workplaces have been treated and children exposed at their schools. Hundreds of cases have come to light since the Hazards Centre began to publicise the issue. They include a child who has contracted aplastic anaemia and is not allowed to live in his own home; two adults who have contracted epilepsy and several who now have cancer and other serious illnesses.

ARSENIC

Insecticide and fungicide. Pre-treatment only, usually with copper and chrome (eg. "Tanalith" process). Timber is most dangerous in the first two weeks before it's dry. Handling wet timber has caused arsenic poisoning. Splinters fester painfully under the skin.

○ Causes skin damage, skin and other cancers; damage to peripheral nerves causing loss of movement or feeling.

CREOSOTE

Fungicide and insecticide. Pre-treatment and remedial use on external timber. Commonest DIY product. Banned in USA for all but professional use.

○ Causes skin and eye irritation and chemical burns made worse by sunlight; permanent damage to cornea of eye; acute bronchitis from spray mist; nausea, headaches; cancer of skin and lungs.

DIELDRIN

Insecticide. Only permitted for pre-treatment use (eg. "Vacsol" product, "Vac-Vac" process). Was a popular remedial product. Banned in the USA. Trade union action has stopped use by Hackney council.

○ Poisons through the skin; nerve poison; causes cancer.

GAMMA HCH (gamma hexachlorocyclohexane) (LINDANE)

The same chemical. Insecticide. Pre-treatment and remedial use. Common in DIY products. Banned or severely restricted in USA and many other countries.

○ Poisons through the skin; irritant, allergen; brain and nervous system poison and causes epilepsy; damages blood system (aplastic anaemia; suspect leukaemia); cancer in animals.

PCP (pentachlorophenol)

Fungicide. Pre-treatment (eg. "Protim" process) and remedial use. DIY products. Banned in many countries; in USA restricted to outdoor professional use.

○ Poisons through the skin. Dust in buildings remains toxic for years. Irritant, nerve poison. Acute effects: rapid rise in body temperature, collapse, death. Chronic effects: local paralysis. Contains dioxins and other impurities which cause cancer and birth defects.

TBTO (tributyltin oxide)

Fungicide. Pre-treatment and remedial use. DIY products. Banned as anti-fouling boat paint because it stops marine animals reproducing. Other uses under review.

○ Irritant, burns skin/eyes, painful rash. Nerve poison. Effects on human reproduction not known.



Not so toxic

As the dangers of traditional poisons become clearer the industry uses chemicals more recently developed whose effects are even less known. Among the treatments that seem the least hazardous are those accepted by the Nature Conservancy Council for use on bat roosts. Two are shown below.

PERMETHRIN

Insecticide. Belongs to the synthetic pyrethroid family (all ending "-thrin") which is associated with nervous system damage and allergy.

BORON COMPOUNDS

Inorganic boron compounds (eg. borax) have caused poisoning in medical use. Organic boron compounds (boron esters), like all organic metal compounds, should be treated as nerve poisons.

ACTION

Use chemicals only as a last resort:

○ Damaged wood can be replaced and preventing damp conditions stops wet rot. Woodworm may be long gone. New wood, properly installed, only needs treatment in exposed locations (eg. roof battens). Woodworm rarely attacks planed, painted and varnished wood. Dry rot is more serious: ask a competent surveyor or builder.

If chemicals must be used:

○ Only do small outdoor jobs yourself; wear protective clothing.
○ Before contracting work check that the company is registered with a trade association - British Wood Preserving Association or Nationwide Association of Preserving Specialists.
○ Get an exact written specification of the work to be done, the reasons for it, the methods and chemicals (full names and safety data sheets).
○ Only allow the least hazardous chemicals in water-based formula-

tions to be used by drill-and-plug, paste or brushing.

○ Don't treat unaffected areas.
○ Don't use dual purpose chemicals if there is only one kind of attack.
○ Keep away from treated areas for as long as possible. The standard 48 hours is too short. PCP and dieldrin can stay at dangerous levels for years, and lindane for weeks. The period for new chemicals is not known.
○ Ensure that treated areas are well ventilated.

If you are exposed to wood preservatives at work:

○ The best safeguards against hazards of timber treatment chemicals have been won where workers have organised in trade unions, such as UCATT (see "HSE backs union ban on wood preservatives" in *Daily Hazard* no.8 p.2).
○ Use your health and safety representatives to get the relevant information such as manufacturer's data sheets, work system specifications etc., to which they are entitled under the *Health and Safety at Work Act* and the *Regulations on*

Safety Representatives and Safety Committees.

○ Ensure your employer is meeting duties to provide safe systems of work, supervision, training, and protective equipment.
○ Report any incidents, accidents, or work-related illness.
○ Call the HSE, or local authority Environmental Health Department, to get the law enforced.

Contacts

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

North London: 01-594 5522; South London: 01-407 8911; elsewhere see local phone book.

○ Enforces safety law at treatment plants, building sites and local authority premises. HSE can connect you to the Employment Medical Advisory Service (EMAS) which is supposed to investigate illness caused by work.

Environmental Health Officers

See under your local authority in the phone book.

○ Enforce safety law in non-industrial premises. Should advise householders and tenants.

If you are exposed to an already treated structure:

○ Find out when it was treated so you can assess the hazard.
○ Ventilate well especially if there is a smell.
○ Seal treated wood and masonry to avoid touching and breathing the chemicals. Ordinary decorating sealants and paints can reduce the risk.

Nature Conservancy Council

Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA.

○ Has list of products approved for use in bat roosts.

UCATT (Union of Construction and Allied Trades Technicians)

177 Abbeville Road, London SW4.
○ One of the unions organising workers in building and construction; it has publicised the hazards of wood preservatives and is doing a survey of members.

London Hazards Centre

308 Grays Inn Road, London WC1.
○ Works with trade union and community groups in the Greater London area. Has information on chemicals and safeguards.

SPOT NEWS

Recycled oil

● The Research and Engineering Department of Ford Motor Company has confirmed that exposure to used engine oil causes cancer in rats. Among the suspect substances in engine oil are heavy metals and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons – the compounds in tobacco which cause cancer. Evidence shows that the longer recycled oil is used the more dangerous it is. This information has only recently been made public, and concerned safety representatives from an engine rebuilding plant have contacted the London Hazards Centre for advice. Workers at risk include car mechanics, garage and transport workers and waste disposal and recycling workers.

Action on asbestos

● In January the first **Asbestos Victims Centre** was officially opened in Glasgow. Clydeside Action on Asbestos are running the centre on a shoestring budget of £2,500 using volunteers, many of whom are victims of the dust. They have been deluged with enquiries from tenants, workers and victims. Already interest has meant that similar groups may be set up in Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen and Perth. The group hope to eventually see a fully fledged Hazards Centre in Glasgow.

Pesticides withdrawn

● The government has been forced to withdraw yet another pesticide previously approved as "safe". Cyhexatin, an organotin insecticide used to control mites on potatoes, and on strawberries and other fruit, has been shown to pose a risk of birth defects. Marketed under product names

like *acarstin*, *plitrin* and *murfite*, it was banned instantly for all uses on 9 November. This is the first pesticide to be turned down after review under the 1986 pesticides regulations. While the ban arises from a new United States study, evidence about its dangers had already been published in 1980.

Nitrites in water

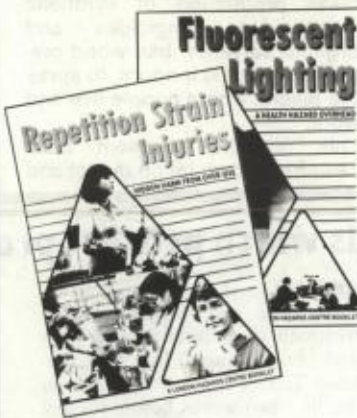
● Back in April 1986 Tower Hamlets Tenants Federation and Tower Hamlets Health Campaign sent the results of some local water samples to the European Commission (see *Daily Hazard* No. 6). High nitrite levels had been found, and as a result, the EEC started proceedings against the UK for failing to comply with the directive on drinking water standards.

The EEC recently wrote back saying that the UK government and Thames Water Authority have reduced the level of nitrites as recent local testing confirmed. This was a major victory for the local community, although the levels were adjusted by lowering the levels of chlorine disinfecting the water, which is not an ideal solution. Tenants will continue to monitor their water supplies independently.

Foam furniture

● Standard and high-resilience polyurethane foam in furniture will be banned from February 1989, said Consumer Affairs Minister Francis Maude on 11 January. Just a week before, the Minister had appeared on television insisting that such a ban would be too costly and complicated. It's good news for workers in the industry's factories, warehouses and shops, as well as for office workers. Maude himself was never in much physical danger: the Crown Suppliers insist on the highest flammability resistance for government furniture. But what about all the other places the stuff is used, such as packaging, soundproofing and insulation? And what about second hand furniture?

Centre booklets



Latest on lighting

For many years office workers and others have known that fluorescent lighting gives you headaches. Now the scientists know too.

A study at the Medical Research Council's Applied Psychology Unit compared the effects of ordinary fluorescent lights with new "high-frequency" types. It found that twice as many people get headaches from normal as from high-frequency lights. It also showed that the more daylight workers get, the better they feel. What it didn't do was compare fluorescent lights with other types of lighting.

This result may call for some hasty rewrites of official attitudes. Last September the HSE published a new guidance booklet on workplace lighting which doesn't mention this problem at all, which is surprising as the HSE is a joint sponsor of the MRC study.

When the Hazards Centre published its own booklet *Fluorescent lighting: a health hazard overhead* last March, a letter came from the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE), inviting the Centre to withdraw the book because "Fluorescent tubes have been in use some forty years, and no large scale problems have been detected".

Some might wonder why it has taken forty years for the scientific evidence to confirm this widely known hazard. The answer may have something to do with the MRC study's third sponsor: Thorn Lighting. Interesting coincidence that the old bad lighting should be denounced just as the industry gets a substitute on the market.

RSI

Hidden hazard exposed

Repetition strain injury (RSI) – damage to muscles, tendons, nerves and joints caused by jobs which involve rapid, repetitive, forceful or twisting movements – is the second commonest type of industrial injury in the UK.

The Hazards Centre's new booklet *Repetition Strain Injuries – Hidden harm from overuse* £6.00 (£3.00 to trade union and community groups) provides essential information on medical aspects, prevention, compensation and organisation against RSI. Contact us for details of discounts on bulk orders.

Centre news

● If you are interested in helping to plan a black workers and hazards conference contact Nilou and Chris at the Hazards Centre. An informal meeting will take place on February 18 to explore ideas.

● We welcome affiliations from individuals and groups committed to the fight against hazards at work and in the community. Affiliation shows support for the centre, brings a year's supply of this newsletter and news of other publications and activities. Rates range from £1.00 to £30.00.

● Judith Staines is currently covering financial administration work while Maggie Alexander is away on parental leave. Chris Udenze has returned to his job-share post after six months leave.



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308 Gray's Inn Road
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Tel: 01-837 5605

HAZARDS '88 CAMPAIGN

The London group of Hazards '88
Series of Saturday Meetings

STRESS AT WORK 26 MARCH
VIOLENCE AT WORK 9 APRIL
OFFICE WORKER'S HAZARDS 7 MAY

Contact London Hazards Centre to book