

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## RAT SCANDAL

In Holborn, north London, a church stands on the site of a plague burial ground. In the shadow of the church is a playground. The gates are pegged shut. At 9 o'clock every morning the 'rat man' arrives to collect the corpses of poisoned rats from the site – twenty in a four day period. The rats had been driven above ground after the collapse of their sewer home adjacent to the site. And with the rats and broken sewers come disease.

Henry 'Titch' Mulhearn has been living rough for most of his adult life. His 'home' in recent years has been a bench in the playground next to St Giles Church. 'I've been skipping here for 13 years', he explained. Six months ago Titch was bitten by a rat. 'I'd bought myself some fish and chips. I ate half and put the rest in my pocket for later', Titch said. He believes the smell of food attracted the rats.

'I was asleep and I was woken up by a rat on my leg. I tried to brush it off and it bit me on the foot', he told the Hazards Centre. 'I thought it had just nipped me. Next day I couldn't walk, my leg went up like a balloon. They put me in hospital.'

The poison got into Titch's blood. 'My whole foot went black. The pain was horrible – up to my chest. I was doubled up with pain. I'm lucky I've still got my feet.'

Chris – who's also homeless – has been mates with Titch for many years. It was Chris who took Titch to University College Hospital. 'The doctor – Dr Marsden – said Titch was a lucky man we got him to the hospital on time. He could have died.'

Titch is now out of hospital and back on his bench. He and Chris regularly see rats scurrying around both the churchyard and the playground. 'A woman sat on a bench three weeks ago and a rat tried to jump in her bag after her sandwiches,' Chris said. 'She



Left: Titch on his park bench home. Top right: dead rat in playground rubbish. Bottom right: rat bite still visible.



thought it was attacking her.'

Similar problems are reported elsewhere. Vagrants dossing close to Waterloo station found rats amongst their bedding. The morning after poison bait was laid sixty dead rats were collected from the pavement.

Thames Water Authority gives the London boroughs £450,000 a year to exterminate sewer rats. Not backed by effective sewer maintenance, this investment is in every sense money down the drain. 'We have a very high rat

infestation . . . and 98 per cent of the rat cases we deal with involve sewers which have crumbled', said one of the pest controllers responsible for the poison baiting at Waterloo. A fifth of London's sewers pre-date 1860 and the majority are pre-war and in poor repair.

Nationally an additional sum of £40 million needs to be spent every year just to keep the ailing sewerage system in operation, says a Consumer Association report. In the absence of this

spending, rats will be an ever-worsening problem. In some areas over half the sewers are known to be infested with vermin. A London Borough Drainage Group survey recently found the numbers of sewer rats across the capital to be 'unacceptably high'.

'To see rats running around is pretty stressful', said David Wheeler, a pollution specialist at the Robens Institute. 'And if they get in your kitchen there is a risk of infection as they transport sewage into the home environment.' Other diseases include Weil's disease, a potentially lethal infection caused by contact with materials contaminated with rat urine. Notified cases are rare – just 11 in the last five years – but many cases may go undiagnosed because doctors are unfamiliar with the disease. A stretch of the River Lee which passes into north London carries signposts warning that bathers are at risk of contracting the disease.

As the sewage system fails the incidence of many other diseases is likely to rise. In England and Wales, for example, there have been over 20,000 cases of dysentery notified to the authorities since 1984, and 627 of typhoid.

### 3 in every 2000 trainees seriously injured

## Youth maiming schemes

Figures not yet released by the Training Commission will reveal a marked increase in the number of fatal and major injuries occurring on government training schemes. Statistics for the first quarter of the year show that three in every 2,000 trainees can expect to be killed or maimed at work. YTS is far more dangerous than most paid work.

In the period January – March 1988 the number of reported fatal and major accidents on YTS was 149.4 per 100,000 trainees, over 53% higher than the rate of 97.3 for 'all industries' listed in the latest Health and Safety

Executive figures (provisional).

### EXCLUSIVE

These record figures follow an escalating number of injuries on schemes throughout 1987, rising from 90 fatal and major injuries per 100,000 trainees in the first quarter, to 134 in the final quarter.

Poor enforcement is one cause of the lax safety standards. The Training Commission's ten part-time safety advisors inspect just 0.15% of schemes in a given

year, so each scheme can only expect a visit every 670 years.

An expected 600,000 adults a year will pass through the new Employment Training scheme. And since September, 16 to 17 year olds have had to register for YTS to receive Income Support, suggesting an additional 90,000 places will have to be found. The government will be providing no extra staff or resources for health and safety purposes.

## INSIDE

- Chemical Policies – Factsheet p3
- Toxic treatment – new book p4



**Black workers face poor housing, high unemployment and dangerous jobs**

# "Unequal comrades"?



**"Black workers are concentrated in the manual, semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. These are the jobs that are generally low-paid, with inferior working conditions, demand longer hours, more shift work and are often regarded as low status or dirty".**

**West Midlands Low Pay Unit**

In 1981 a National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) sponsored conference noted that in the USA, Black, Chicana, Native American and Asian-American workers are more likely to suffer and die from job-related illnesses and accidents because they work in the dirtiest and most dangerous occupations. What little evidence has been gathered shows that black people are in much the same situation in Britain.

Research by the Coronary Prevention Group has revealed high levels of coronary heart disease among Asians in Britain while the NIOSH conference found that 'high blood pressure kills black [of African descent] women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four seventeen times more often than white women in that age range.'

With the help of the London Hazards Centre black people from community and workplace

based organisations held a meeting to look at the difficulties faced in dealing with workplace health and safety issues. The importance of health and safety to black communities was easily identified by one description of conditions in an East End garment factory - 'visibly high levels of dust in the air, overcrowding, inflammable materials treated with toxic chemicals and criminal lack of basic fire precautions'.

One of the chief concerns voiced in the meeting was the failure of trade unions to address issues of concern to black workers, while claiming to represent their interests. Black members pointed out their needs as exploited industrial and service sector workers, yet the isolated efforts of some unions and union representatives have concentrated on the 'cultural needs' of some black workers (food, religious holidays, clothes etc.) and occasional support for individuals, for example in anti-deportation campaigns.

What then can be done? How can black workers best organise?

In major disputes such as at Grunwicks, and action which has not received such media attention, black workers have continued to organise in a way which does not dissociate the workplace from the wider community. Only recently in Hackney a Tur-

kish community organisation has been working directly with garment workers on many industrial issues, including health and safety.

The meeting observed that although trade unions have large resources and rights in law black workers seem to benefit little from either, even though as a group they are more likely than whites to be union members. It was recognised that black workers' experience of trade unions has forced them to create their own methods and means of struggle both within and outside the trade union movement. This is a process which must be developed so that black workers have effective and representative organisations to defend trade union, civil and human rights. "It is up to us to decide our priorities, to decide what is a 'health and safety' issue and how we want it dealt with".

**Further reading:**

- *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain;* RAMDIN 1987
- *Last Among Equals;* LOWPAYUNIT 1988
- *Confidential: Racism!;* YETRU 1987
- *Unequal Comrades: Trade Unions Unequal Opportunity and Racism;* WRENCH 1986
- *Occupational Hazards and Black Workers;* DAVIS 1977



## Conference a success – Campaign continues

The Third National Hazards Conference was held in Sunderland in September. Five hundred hazards activists from a wide variety of trade unions and campaigning groups came together to build on the success of the Hazards '88 Campaign for a safe and healthy environment at work and in the community.

The two-day conference ran workshops on 37 hazards issues, some of which were in huge demand such as the stress workshop which ran six times. In the main speeches there was great anger expressed at the continuing rise in death and injury at work and some personal bitterness from those involved in the major tragedies of Zeebrugge, Kings Cross and Piper Alpha. Speakers from the NUS spoke on the safety aspects of the P&O dispute, and there was a frightening account from survivors of the Piper Alpha rig disaster of the



*Hazards movement grows in strength*

lack of safety organisation offshore.

Another theme to emerge was the importance of building links between trade union and community campaigns. Areas where this has been achieved are in the Campaign Against Estate Sales (CASE UK) and the campaigns against the imposition of Housing Action Trusts. Other examples were the anti-privatisation campaigns, particularly water,

and the campaign against the poll tax.

Michael Meacher MP, the Shadow Employment Secretary gave a tough and committed speech condemning employer negligence and calling for tougher legislation and enforcement. He pledged Labour Party support for the following reforms:

● **The right to a safe job**  
Employers should have a legal

duty not to discriminate against workers who question health and safety standards. Employers found to have discriminated against workers should be liable to prosecution.

● **The right to independent inspection**

This is not a right for workers in the North Sea, civil aviation and sea and rail transport sectors.

● **The right to accountable management**

Company law should be amended to make one director responsible for health and safety of the employees and others affected by their actions.

● **The right to justice**

All serious health and safety offences should go to Crown Court, so that prison sentences and substantial fines are possible. The two year maximum sentence for health and safety offences should be extended. Directors should be prosecuted and be given criminal records.



The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations will come into effect next year. But trade union safety reps will need more than the new regulations on hazardous substances to just hold the line on chemical hazards against the forces of deregulation and privatisation.

Local authority unions working at branch level are negotiating policies for controlling chemical hazards which take their members and the communities they serve far ahead of the new regulations which are due to come into

force on 1 October 1989 (see box). This factsheet sets out the essential elements of a *chemicals policy*. This is the document in which the employer commits the organisation, whether it's a company or a local authority, to comply with set methods and standards in all aspects of chemical use. It needs to be endorsed, in writing, at the highest level of the organisation and to be 'wired-in' to every level of the management and trade union structure. It must therefore be an integral part of the *safety policy*.

Just writing a policy and agreeing

it will not in itself alter very much unless the employer makes organisational changes, and commits staff and resources to implementing all stages of the policy.

### The union role

The union side must also be able to monitor the policy. This means using the *Safety Representatives Regulations* (See DH 5) to insist on adequate numbers of safety reps, trained in the necessary skills and able to exercise their right to time off for inspection, reporting back, and meeting to

co-ordinate their work. To be effective in monitoring a chemicals policy the union side will also need textbooks and extra facility time, for visiting libraries, union offices and outside resource centres. All this should be written into a *health and safety agreement* between management and unions which defines the union role in decision-making and lays down procedures for resolving differences over chemicals at all levels from vetting committee to individual workplace. Without this agreement the policy will not work.

## An existing policy – Islington Council

The Centre has worked in most London boroughs on some aspect of chemical use and safety. Contacts with management and trades union reps in Hackney and Islington have proved particularly fruitful. Both boroughs are now moving towards comprehensive hazardous substances policies going far beyond the requirements of the COSHH Regs (see box). Below is a highly condensed summary of the Islington agreement.

**Policy statement:** The Council accepts its responsibility for protecting workers, the public and the environment from chemical risks and will:

○ carry out a full *audit* of all chemicals used/stored on council property, draw up an *inventory* of chemicals and prepare a standard hazards *data sheet* on each material listed.

○ together with the trade unions draw up a list of *permitted substances* and what these substances may be used for. The council and unions will review *work methods* and will authorise the use of chemicals only where these pro-

vide both a safe and effective means of doing the work.

○ safe working practices will be drawn up for each substance, and will include requirements for adequate levels of training and supervision.

○ where concern is expressed about the hazards presented by the ingredients of any chemical formulation, it is accepted that the substance will not be used until after consultation with the Trades Unions.

Copies of the full Islington Policy Statement and related clauses are available from the Hazards Centre.

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## New London Hazards Centre Publication

# Deadly dossier of poisons

In four years of operation the Hazards Centre has received hundreds of calls on the subject of wood preservatives. The dossier of cases contains evidence of a battery of diseases – sometimes fatal, caused by these chemicals. Now a book from the Hazards Centre tells why unnecessary timber treatments are poisoning workers and the public and shows how to preserve timber without endangering health.

Over the years alarming reports of the effects of wood preservatives became more frequent, particularly from workers in the timber preservation industry. Many complained of serious disorders including allergy, skin problems, epilepsy, nerve damage, cancer and life-threatening blood diseases.

In May 1987 our research was taken up by the housing pressure group Shelter, leading to national coverage in the *Observer*. The hundreds of calls and letters from anxious workers, tenants and householders which followed the *Observer* article convinced us of the urgent need to produce a comprehensive, readable and understandable book on chemical treatments and the alternative methods of timber preservation.

**Toxic treatments** will cover the following areas:

- Introduction – wood and property; chemicals and people; the growth of the multi-million pound timber preservation industry
- The chemicals and their victims
- Alternatives to the use of chemical wood preservatives
- Control and clean-up
- Directory of chemicals used in timber preservation

The book is essential reading for anyone who may be exposed to wood preservative chemicals, whether at work or in the home. It is also a valuable resource for environmental, medical and occupational health professionals, architects and others involved in specifying for timber use and conservations. **Toxic treatments will be available from the London Hazards Centre price £4.95 inc. postage and packing from 20 November 1988.**



*Hackney Direct Labour Organisation workers prevent entry of dangerous chemically treated timbers to local building site.*

## VIDEO

### Wrath of Grapes

The United Farmworkers of America have produced a short video which puts a strong case for a boycott of Californian grapes. The boycott is in response to the current use of lethal pesticides in the vineyards, mainly owned by large multinational companies and worked in by Chicana workers. This 'migrant' labour suffers a high rate of poisoning (300,000 poisoning cases per year) as well as high rates of cancer and birth defects.

Not only do the pesticides poison workers, their residues also affect consumers. Spray drift and ground water contamination harm the local community. High rates of child cancer and birth abnormalities are being recorded in the main grape growing areas.

The boycott is to press for workers' rights to fair and free elections; the banning of the pesticides captan, dinoseb, methyl bromide and parathion; and for the testing for residues on grapes for sale.

'Wrath of Grapes'. 12 minutes. Available for loan from LHC.

## Publications list

Last year the London Hazards Centre published a unique pack of information in co-operation with Southwark Council: **Southwark Health and Safety at Work Kit**. The pack gave employers and employees in the borough essential information about the law and health and safety practice in the form of concise, readable action sheets and checklists.

Following the successful use of the pack in Southwark, several other councils and public sector umbrella organisations have shown interest in having a standardised version of the pack.

If your organisation is responsible for promoting good workplace health and safety practices and would be interested in a standardised version of the kit, please contact Maggie Alexander at the London Hazards Centre.

**Southwark Safety Kit**  
£1.00.

**Repetition Strain Injuries: Hidden harm from overuse**  
£6.00 (£3.00 to trade union and community groups).

**VDU Hazards Handbook: A worker's guide to the effects of new technology**  
£4.95 (plus 50p post and packing).

**Fluorescent Lighting: A health hazard overhead**  
£5.00 (£2.00 to trade union and community groups).

**Asbestos Fact Pack (PAAC)**  
£5.00 (£3.50 to trade union and community groups)  
**PAAC Asbestos Newsletter**  
£1.00

**Pesticides Action Bulletin**  
Cheques payable to 'Pesticides Action Group'. Subscriptions are £5.00 employers, authorities etc. £3.00 trade union and community groups, £1.00 individuals

## Centre news

● The Hazards Centre finally received a London Boroughs Grant Scheme grant which was reduced by 15% which means we have had to drastically cut all our budgets. The committee has stated its intention to impose a further cut of at least 15% from April 1989, which may severely affect our ability to provide a free and accessible advice service. Please help us by writing to your local ward councillor or council's representative on the LBGS in support of the Centre.

● 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.

### Donations to Trust

● If you have used our services and find them valuable, you or your organisation may wish to support LHC by making a donation. Please make payments to the London Hazards Centre Trust.

### Faces change

● Fiona Murie starts work at the Centre this month. Fiona has previously been involved in organising for the GMB, especially working with YTS trainees.

