

THE DAILY HAZARD

Pesticides clampdown

While NUPE members hold the line on weedkillers at a Surrey waterworks, more councils are banning dangerous pesticides. But (see right) privatisation may threaten these gains

A dispute over hazards has stopped all use of weedkillers at a Surrey sewage works for more than six months. NUPE members at Thames Water Authority's Hogsmill Valley works are refusing to handle herbicides containing atrazine and simazine until safeguards are improved.

"We said we don't want it on the works without proper facilities for storage, protective clothing, lockers and disposal," said Barry Tribe, one of two safety stewards representing NUPE members at Hogsmill. The only operative to be selected for a course in knapsack spraying, Barry has refused to go until the union's safety requirements are satisfied. NUPE has now taken up the case at regional level.

"Management has said that everything's fine. They told the local paper we had every facility and the only reason spraying stopped was because it was out of season. But we are in dispute and chemicals won't be used again until it's resolved."

The union has listed 10 points where they think Thames Water has breached the Health and Safety at Work Act. "We've been told our objections are just ways to avoid doing work," said Barry, "but I will gladly do weeding by hand. Weeds have to be pulled out of the filter beds by hand anyway because pesticides damage the bacteria that break down sewage. The rest of the job is walkways, paving, cracks in concrete. By the time you've got all the equipment, marked the area to be sprayed, and filled out the documents, it would be quicker to do it by hand."

The NUPE members at Hogsmill are concerned that weedkillers may also endanger

NUPE action and council bans

Workers' anger in row over weed killers

DESIGNER THIEVES HIT SHOP

The chemicals

Atrazine: Irritant to skin and eyes. May cause severe allergic reactions. Animal evidence suggests it may damage various organs, including the thyroid. Suspected cancer agent and reproductive hazard.

Simazine: Very similar to atrazine and found as an impurity in it. Animal and other laboratory data suggest the hazards are similar.

wildlife and drinking water. "We used to find dead birds around the site a few weeks after contractors sprayed. We haven't seen any since spraying was stopped. The labels on the containers say

● **Colchester, Essex.** The council decided in April that it would use pesticides only as a last resort. Non-chemical means will be employed whenever possible.

● **Hackney.** The council's chemical steering group is expected to accept the recommendation from its sub-group on wood preservatives that the borough should stop specifying chemical pre-treatment of timber in new works. Lindane, PCP and TBTO will be banned on remedial treatment of old property, while investigations continue into alternative methods.

● **Kent.** The county council has joined the growing list of local authorities which have prohibited the use of lindane, PCP and TBTO in its premises.

"Not to be used near waterways, ponds and wildlife", yet here's the water industry wanting to use atrazine, which is already the commonest pesticide in drinking water." (See *Daily Hazard* No. 13.)

Pesticide plant victims visit London



Four survivors of the Bhopal pesticides factory disaster visited Britain in May and June as part of a tour of the US and Europe in pursuit of justice and compensation. The toxic gas leak in December 1984 killed more than 3,000 and disabled thousands more.

In the photo, Sunil Kumar Rajput, left, and Chander Singh Nimgule, centre, talk with a local resident next to the Berk Spencer Acids chemical plant at Stratford. Sunil is 17. His parents, three of his sisters and two brothers were killed by the gas cloud. Chander Singh's lungs were damaged and he can no longer work at his trade. His wife and eight children are still disabled.

In Stratford the delegation met campaigners who have forced Newham Council to investigate cancer deaths in the area.

The action by NUPE members at Hogsmill is one of a number of challenges by public service manual unions to the automatic acceptance of pesticides as a working method.

Safety gains like this may be under threat, as private employers use the 1988 Local Government Act to fight the inclusion of health and safety provisions in contracts for council work put out to compulsory competitive tendering.

In March the Building Employers Confederation banded in the thin end of the government's wedge by obtaining a High Court judicial review of Islington Council's tendering contract. Lord Justice Parker said the contract related to "non-commercial matters" and would have to be "very considerably amended" to comply with the Act. At the same time he held it was legal, for example, to require the employment of a safety officer for every 300 workers. The implications of this mixed judgement are still being assessed by the Council.

Much of Islington's contract simply calls for contractors to comply with law or accepted good practice. In certain ways it improves on statutory requirements. For example, Islington NUPE has negotiated the inclusion of the chemicals safety policy in Parks Department contracts. The safety policy was won in 1987, and specifies acceptable chemicals and work systems.

The judgement may threaten advances in boroughs such as Hackney, where the council has been tightening up health and safety provisions for both contractors and direct labour.

INSIDE

● Insect pests in offices and homes – Factsheet p3

● Construction safety campaign enters second year p4

CASEFILE

No.1 in a regular series where we describe case histories from our files

Glue caused rash and nerve damage

Alan is a bricklayer nearing retirement.

The job. In the summer of 1987 he worked for six weeks at a swimming pool sticking brickwork onto walls using epoxy resin adhesive. Much of the work was above his head and drops of glue fell down the back of his neck, often without him realising. No special protective clothing was provided.

The job involved using organic solvents and he inhaled a lot of vapour, especially when cleaning adhesive from his tools. He knows that one of the solvents was methylene chloride.

The effects. A red itchy rash broke out on his hands, back of neck and scrotum. The doctor at his health centre did not recognise this as a classic case of epoxy dermatitis and prescribed anti-histamine tablets. No-one advised him to claim

DHSS industrial injury benefit.

The rash cleared up two months after he left the job but he still has problems with the nerves and circulatory system in his legs. His legs feel cold even in warm weather and he may feel sweaty when he's not even warm. He gets a tingling sensation in his feet.

Conclusion. Damage to nerves in the extremities, leading to tingling, numbness, and loss of feeling or movement, can be caused by a wide range of chemicals including lead, organic solvents (especially n-hexane, carbon disulphide and the ketone MIBK). It is not unusual for damage to be found in legs but not hands.

Numbness and tingling can also result from damage to blood circulation produced by vibration – Raynaud's syndrome. It is most common in the hands of workers using

vibrating tools – “vibration whitefinger” or VWF – but can affect the feet of those standing on vibrating surfaces. Cases have been reported in engine room workers on ships. Alan served for two years in the engine rooms of torpedo boats during the war but experienced no symptoms until after working with epoxy resin and solvent. Blood circulation in the legs can be harmed by smoking. Alan does not smoke.

The most likely conclusion is that Alan has suffered peripheral nerve damage as a result of solvent exposure. The condition seems to be getting better slowly.

He would be able to sue his employer for negligence in that they totally failed to protect him from the well-known hazards of epoxy resins and solvent vapour, but he is not a union member and cannot afford to take up the case himself.

Lindane miscarriage alert

A recent computer search of international scientific databases has revealed an alarming link between exposure to the freely-available pesticide lindane and increased risk of miscarriage and other reproductive problems.

The Hazards Centre has recently been advising in a number of cases where lindane's reproductive toxicity is under suspicion: Of two women whose house had been treated with lindane, one had one miscarriage and the other had two miscarriages within a year of the treatment. In another case, a pregnant woman was exposed to lindane during the fumigation of her house against cat fleas. Her son was born with multiple abnormalities and subsequently died at the age of five.

In February 1989 the Government, replying to an early day motion banning the use of lindane in wood preservatives said: “Wood preservatives containing lindane are safe if used in accordance with the required conditions of approval.” The Government seem prepared to ignore the wealth of scientific evidence linking lindane exposure with nervous system, liver, kidney, blood and respiratory damage – and now, the possibility of effects on unborn children.

Nonsensical solution to noise nuisance

Post office workers' complaints about excessive noise levels in coding offices have fallen on deaf ears. Management's solution to the problem: Wear a Walkman!

As well as failing to deal with the source of the noise, in order to drown out the sound of the machines the workers have to turn up the Walkmans to levels which themselves may cause hearing loss.

RSI research reveals risks

A recent report* published by the Institute of Occupational Medicine in Edinburgh has highlighted the growing concern over Repetition Strain Injury. Funded by the HSE and quite the most substantial study of its kind conducted in the UK, the report examines the relation between repetitive movements at work and injuries to the upper limbs, by comparing people clinically diagnosed with injuries against controls. It concludes that there is an association between movements at work and risk of injury but not whether work causes the injury or merely makes worse an underlying condition. Cleaners, hairdressers, keyboard users and machine operators are identified as being particularly at risk.

Unfortunately the report begins from the standpoint that work needs to be proven to be unsafe before it is stopped or limited. The London Hazards Centre argues that work should not be performed until it is shown to be safe. What we need is research designed around that fundamental assumption and which accepts that actual reports of hazard or injury by workers are more reliable than assertions by employers to the contrary.

* *Clinical epidemiological study of the relations between upper limb soft tissue disorders and repetitive movements at work*, IOM, January 1989.

HAPHAZARD

Law and order special: spot the difference

30 days for men who killed fox

TWO MEN who killed a fox which choked to death after being buried alive in its earth were yesterday jailed for 30 days.

In the first prosecution of its kind, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals argued that the fox, which is not protected by law, was made captive when two holes to

its lair were blocked. Barry Pruden, of Bootle, Liverpool, and Stephen Horton, of Seaford, both aged 27 and unemployed, had been found guilty on January 3 by Birkenhead magistrates of causing unnecessary suffering and remanded for social inquiry reports.

They were banned from keeping any animal for two years.

In 1987 we reported on the absurd similarity between the penalties imposed for fare dodging on the London Underground and the average fine for employers whose negligence causes the death of a worker – both around £400. (see *Daily Hazard* No.15).

Nothing changes. In February this year two men who killed a fox were given jail sentences of 30 days. The BBC, which was found guilty of failing to take reasonable measures to prevent the outbreak of legionnaires' disease which killed three people, was fined just £3,600.

BBC fined for legion disease

Susan Tirbutt

THE BBC was fined a total of £3,600 with £3,196 costs

for management failures leading up to the outbreak beginning in March last year when the key supervisor responsible for disinfecting and maintaining the cooling tower failed. The

Clippings from the *Guardian* 1 February 1989

This factsheet is about the hazards of insect infestations. In the next *Daily Hazard* we look at the hazards of the chemicals used to treat them.

Tenants in several London boroughs have had successes in forcing councils to undertake adequate treatment. In Haringey, the Broadwater Farm tenants have gone further and taken pest control into their own hands.

Meanwhile, the Centre has had a number of reports of misuse of pesticides in offices. The story usually begins with a contractor spraying around workers at their desks, and ends with sick workers. And sometimes in pursuit of a non-existent bug.

Wherever infestations occur, the approach must be to eliminate the conditions which allow infestation; insist on information and

consultation; plan an effective programme; and prevent exposure to dangerous pesticides.

Pests

Insects are pests either because they bite you (fleas), or because they contaminate food with disease, or because they cause allergies (furniture mites, house dust mites). They thrive where people have created artifi-

cial environments which suit them. The warm heating ducts, hollow walls and floors, rubbish chutes, dampness and shoddy finish of tower blocks have provided an ideal environment for cockroaches and pharaoh's ants. Race and class stereotypes blame the "dirty tenant" for the results of poor housing design and lack of maintenance and services.

The Insects

Cockroaches

Two frequent types, the German and Oriental. Their flattened body enables them to squeeze through small cracks. They don't make nests, but congregate in suitable places – "harbourages" – such as holes near pipes, or piles of packaging. They breed quickly and protect their eggs in capsules which survive pesticide applications. They carry diseases ranging from salmonella to typhoid and their sheer numbers can make them a frightening pest.

Pharaoh's ants

A tiny reddish ant which thrives in warm damp conditions. Their small size enables them to get into apparently sealed food packaging, and sterile packages in hospitals.

Mites

They like damp places. Various types infest food, furniture (feeding on natural fibres in upholstery) or mattresses (feeding on skin flakes). They cause allergies – food mites cause dermatitis, house dust mites cause asthma.

Silverfish

Like warm damp places, come out at night to feed on mould and carbohydrates. Harmless.

Bedbugs

They're smelly and they bite, but they don't carry disease.

Fleas

More likely to be dog or cat fleas than human. Controllable by frequent cleaning. If you have a "flea" infestation and there are no insects visible, you may have:

"Cable-bug" or "Phantom insect bite"

You are getting what seem to be insect bites, and no insects can be found. Two causes have been suggested for this:

Static electricity. Walking on carpeted floors builds up static in your body. The charges "leak" away unnoticed, leaving a tiny irritable rash like a bite. Other floorings may also generate static, and so do VDUs.

Carpet fragments. Heavy duty workplace carpets shed invisibly small spikes which work their way through clothing and "sting" you. Anti-static carpets release most fragments.

What you can do . . . In the Workplace

Law

Health and Safety at Work Act Section 2: obliges employers to ensure employees' health, safety and welfare.

Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986: users must take all reasonable precautions to protect the health of human beings.

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations in force October 1989. For both employees and non-employees, employers must:

- Assess the health risk from a hazardous substance
- Prevent or control exposure
- Monitor exposure "where requisite", ie where a limit may be exceeded
- Provide information on health risks and precautions

Action

Get a survey and report on the infestation by an independent environmental health consultant, not the treatment contractor. The report should specify:

- Pest species
- Extent of infestation
- Environmental causes of infestation, eg openings for rats, mice or birds (all carry insects); lack of cleaning; cracks and holes in warm places which provide harbourages; food sources.

Law

Infestations are a Statutory Nuisance under *Public Health Act 1936* Section 92. Under Section 99 of the Act, an individual can go to court to force a local authority to deal with a statutory nuisance.

Consultation: under *Housing Act 1980* Section 43 every local authority must have a procedure for consulting tenants on matters of housing management, including major works on estates, and must publish the procedure.

Action

If there is an active tenants' association, use it. The Environmental Health Department has a duty to inspect premises "prejudicial to health". Get onto them by letter and follow up by phone.

If there is no action, you will have to put pressure on through councillors. You will need to:

- Raise awareness among tenants through meetings or leafleting.

- Methods of eradication. As far as possible these should avoid chemicals in favour of cleaning and structure/design solutions.

- Recommendations for future prevention, eg structure, hygiene, heating, ventilation, control of damp.

Get a written specification of work methods

- Use least toxic chemicals in the smallest effective quantities
- Apply chemicals only where actually necessary to reach pests
- Use chemicals in the least dangerous method of application
- No treatment while workers are in occupied areas
- Advance warning to workers
- Warning signs on approaches to treatment area
- After treatment have thorough ventilation and vacuum with type H industrial vacuum cleaner
- Air and surface-wipe tests after application, and no re-entry until chemicals are at 1/100th of the occupational exposure limit or other recommended limit. 1/1000th is a safer margin.

If you're poisoned

- get out of the office
- ensure the illness is recorded in the workplace Accident Book
- see your doctor and try to get tested for the chemical used
- don't go back in until there has been full ventilation and cleaning.

In the community

- Demonstrate the extent of infestation by conducting a survey. Cockroaches can be caught using sampling traps: the most effective ones are baited with pheromones (cockroach sex hormones). Get the traps into a sample of the flats for 1–2 weeks. Write up the results and arrange a meeting to present the results to councillors. Take some filled traps with you!

Demand

- Proper identification of the nature of the infestation and its causes, and a plan to deal with it. "Block treatment" is almost always necessary: the entire building should be treated in the shortest possible period, moving inwards from the outside.
- Full information on the methods to be used, followed by a public meeting to discuss them. Information must be provided in all community languages.
- If the work involves piercing walls, check whether they're made of asbestos.

CASES

The office

Monthly spraying of a poorly cleaned office led to a build up of pesticide-laden dust but left workers still bitten. The union branch (MSF) successfully demanded proper cleaning: since when, no bites. The pest was never identified and the pesticide company admitted their product was being misused. Cleaning and identification should have been the first steps.

The hospital cleaner

This one got into the official HSE records: cleaning after a treatment, this worker was poisoned by bendiocarb. The HSE pointed to poor training and supervision.

The schoolteachers

Treated with organophosphates before the weekend and left shut, the building poisoned staff on Monday. Two people were hospitalised. The pesticide had been used according to the manufacturer's recommendations. Investigators concluded that these were based only on outdoor use; they also kept staff and pupils away till pesticide levels were 1/100th of the "safe" level.

The tenants get block treatment

Eight years of pressure by a Camden tenants' association finally led to block treatment of cockroaches. Instead of piecemeal spraying in homes, holes were drilled to dust insecticide below floors, behind walls, and in the heating ducts and rubbish chutes. Eighteen months later, the roaches haven't reappeared.

The tenants take over

The community organisations on Broadwater Farm estate ran a successful campaign for block treatment of cockroaches. They insisted that the pest control contractors employ and train local people. Once trained, the locals set up a company which maintains pest control on the estate and also works elsewhere.

Contacts

Health and Housing Group, tel 01-373 8028. Independent environmental health officers.

Beta Pest Control ("The Bugbusters"), tel 01-885 4992. Company set up by Broadwater Farm tenants. Contact them for information on campaigning – or for help with pest control in their area.

Building campaign launches year two

There is a notorious history of exploitation of building workers. The result: over 1,500 fatal accidents in the last ten years, with the death toll now rising at the rate of **three lives a week**. Injuries during this time may have run into millions, with only a small proportion (500,000) being reported. Add to this 40,000 untimely deaths from work-related diseases, and the picture is one of an industry out of control.

The Construction Safety Campaign (CSC), set up to challenge this massive increase in suffering, had its first Annual General Meeting on 8 April. Ninety trade union delegates attended, representing building workers from all over the country. They brought forward resolutions from branches and the following ideas for future action:

AGREED: To keep generating the publicity which is creating a rapidly increasing public awareness of the appalling safety

record of the industry.

AGREED: To keep up the public meetings around the country, and to hold a national conference at the end of the year.

AGREED: To step up the leafletting of sites, encouraging trade union membership, and election of safety reps.

AGREED: To step up demonstrations at building sites where there has been a death.

AGREED: To demonstrate at Coroners Courts against the seemingly inevitable verdict of "accidental death".

AGREED: To continue the Campaign's highly successful work with the Labour Party and trade unions to give safety in the construction industry a high profile and to hit hard at negligent employers.

The Construction Safety Campaign Annual Report for 1988-89 is available from 52 Ansdell Road, London SE15 2DL, £1.00 (50p each for orders over five copies).

TWO REASONS WHY

Coroners continue to deliver verdicts of 'accidental death' on construction workers even when safety has been flagrantly disregarded. Two recent deaths in London show what the Campaign is all about

Ganger Timothy Butler, 41, was working on a Cemtec site in Lambeth, when he had to jump into an **unshored** trench to lay two lightweight pipes. He was drowned in an avalanche of mud and slurry as the trench collapsed in on top of him.

The verdict returned by Southwark Coroners Court in May was accidental death.

Window fitter Paul Elvin, 24, was working on platform 11 at Euston Station, when the aluminium pole he was carrying touched a 25,000 volt overhead cable. It was Paul's first day on the job, and he had received **no safety instruction whatsoever**.

The verdict returned by St Pancras Coroners Court in March was accidental death.



Three of the delegates who came from all over Britain for the first Construction Safety Campaign national AGM

Labour promises penalties

The CSC Annual General Meeting was addressed by Shadow Employment Secretary Michael Meacher, one of many MPs backing the campaign.

He declared the Labour Party's commitment to higher health and safety standards which, he said, "represents a huge advance on the facile and cosmetic approach of this Government, which puts profit before safety every time. We believe that the horrific level of deaths and maimings at work will only be reversed by making negligent employers liable to a hefty jail sentence."

Mr Meacher criticised recent remarks by Employment Secre-

tary, Norman Fowler. "How can he claim that the law is being stringently enforced when last year in London there were 36 deaths and 413 major injuries, yet there were only 18 prosecutions and the average fine was a piffling £1,050, scarcely even pocket money to a major construction firm?" Attacking Mr Fowler's failure to support calls for top company personnel to be jailed where health and safety has been flouted, Mr Meacher told delegates: "It is only Mr Fowler who is ready to send people to prison for benefit fraud, but not employers who cause people's death at work."

Red-handed bosses get trivial fines

Last Autumn, the BBCTV *Brass Tacks* programme lifted the lid on safety standards in the construction industry. The programme was so effective that it was commented on in the recent debate on construction safety in the House of Commons. The TV cameras followed HSE inspector Sandra Caldwell on her rounds. On one site they filmed her ordering work to stop in an unsafe trench; as soon as her back was turned work resumed under orders from the site foreman. On another site she placed a prohibition order on unsafe scaffolding; the cameras returned the following day and filmed the scaffolding back in use.

Clearly, the HSE had to act. They charged Islef and Hoffman

Columbia Wharf Ltd over the scaffolding and Danalith UK Ltd over the trench and announced the fact in a flamboyant press release: *Construction Companies Nailed by Brass Tacks*. The outcome? Islef was fined £500 with £90 costs, Danalith £300 with £50 costs.

Asked by the Hazards Centre if this was fair, a HSE spokesperson said, "Fairness doesn't come into it. I never make a comment on that. That's not for me to decide." He did agree though that it was "not a particularly significant fine".

Brass Tacks producer Steve Hewlett said he was pleased there had been a conviction and went on, "People could so easily have been killed. What does it

matter - the size of these fines. The level of punishment just shows there needs to be a change in the law. People should be disbarred from holding contracts to make it worth their while to take safety seriously." Likewise, Construction Safety Campaign secretary Tony O'Brien said on the fines, "It's nothing, is it? It's not a deterrent. These companies will easily take care of that. There is no incentive there to keep to the law."

Let's leave the last word to the HSE spokesperson. He summed up, "The law has been discharged, our duty done. It's water under the bridge, let's move on to the next case." With this level of official complacency, the carnage will go on.

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London Hazards Centre Trust is funded by