

THE DAILY HAZARD

TUC to run RSI campaign?

As part of its Common Action Priorities, the TUC will launch a campaign on RSI in the Autumn. Announcing this at a one-day conference on RSI in Congress House in July, Judith Carter of UNISON speaking for the General Council gave a commitment in support of every RSI sufferer.

While it is more than welcome to see the TUC make a push on RSI, the hope must be this will be an improvement on previous health and safety campaigns. It is worrying that the TUC only envisages running a 6-month campaign. One possibility being considered is setting up regional teams to work with safety representatives in tackling companies with a particularly poor RSI record.

There have been recent developments in RSI compensation cases. The long awaited appeal in the British Telecom/National Communications Union case did not finally take place. An out-of-court agreement was reached for an undisclosed sum. The important point is that the original judgement stands. The case involved keyboarders who were injured some 10 years ago;

BT was found liable on the grounds of failing to provide suitable workstations. Another crucial keyboarding case is awaiting judgement, which will probably be given in September. National Union of Journalists member Rafiq Mughal developed RSI while working for Reuters four years ago, and his case came up in the High Court in July. The company threw everything into its defense, even producing witnesses who alleged that the problem was 'all in the mind'.

The Transport and General Workers Union recently made a turkey out of Bernard Matthews. The poultry processor was found liable for causing RSIs due to the provision of inadequate training, job rotation and systems of work. Awards were in the range — £600-£6,000 and will give some

protection not only to food processing workers but also to those in RSI-prone sectors. The judge referred to the 'sloppiness' with which Bernard Matthews implemented procedures for warning workers of RSI. He also noted that the company slowed down the production line when demonstrating it to potential customers and speeded it up

workers paint figures on piece rates for 8.5 hours a day with a 30 minute lunch break and one other 15 minute break. The company has a three page procedure for dealing with RSI which does not contain a word on prevention and amounts to a procedure for sacking people without compensation. Try the flavour of this, 'If a new



Peter Smith

Turkey processing is bloody work

afterwards to regain lost production.

Despite the improving legal position, many companies are continuing to expose their workers to appalling risks as illustrated by the conditions introduced by a ceramics manufacturer in the North of England. In this company,

employee suffers from RSI or similar problems it is likely that continued employment will aggravate the conditions. In these cases, unless suitable alternative work is available, it may be in the best interests of the employee that the employment contract be terminated.'

So come on, TUC! North and South, office and factory, huge numbers of workers are suffering or at risk from RSI which could be prevented by the introduction of proper equipment, job design and payments systems. Run a campaign which is going to defend workers by demanding decent conditions and stop pleading for social partnership with employers who prefer to cripple people than endure a small reduction in their profits.

Bus drivers forced to work unsafe hours

Cuts in wages and conditions are forcing bus workers to work dangerously long hours says the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The TGWU has launched a public awareness campaign, backed by an explanatory leaflet: *Is Your Driver Safe?*

Wages have slumped from 7% above average male earnings to 12% below in the years since deregulation. In London, bus workers have been presented with new employment contracts

which smash previously agreed conditions, including working hours. Those who have refused to sign have been sacked; the TGWU is to take a dozen cases to Industrial Tribunals.

'Drivers are being pressurised into working the maximum number of permitted hours. They are having to work such long shifts they are turning down more overtime because they are so knackered. This will have an obvious effect on accident

levels' said Dave Pugh, TGWU Regional Organiser.

Statistical reports from Britain's Industrial Relations Service (IRS) and the EC's Eurostat show we work longer hours than in most other EC countries, have fewer holidays and have less legal protection than other EC workers. The Government's drive for deregulation across the board is not going to help the situation at all, and as far as public transport goes, it adds up to death on the road.

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Watch your drinking!

Workers at Hillingdon Civic Centre have recently suffered an outbreak of blinding headaches and dizziness. Many thought they were being afflicted by a new virus but it turned out that their drinking water was contaminated by the organic solvent xylene.

Some 2,000 workers were exposed, drinking up to 200 times the legal limit for two weeks before the contamination was discovered. The water was also used for cooking by Hillingdon Meals on Wheels. Despite numerous complaints by staff, management refused to have the water tested, insisting it was safe to drink. The trade union UNISON had the water independently tested and successfully got the water supply turned off.

Xylene, the archetypal glue sniffing solvent, is also poisonous by swallowing. As well as being a narcotic, it can cause irritation of the throat, lungs and stomach. It is suspected of being harmful to foetuses and reducing fertility.

Hillingdon UNISON contacted the National Poisons Unit (NPU) and arranged, in conjunction with the Council medical team, for their members to be interviewed by NPU staff about possible long-term effects. There is particular concern about the position of pregnant women. After cutting off the running water the management provided the workers with

bottled water and promised a full investigation.

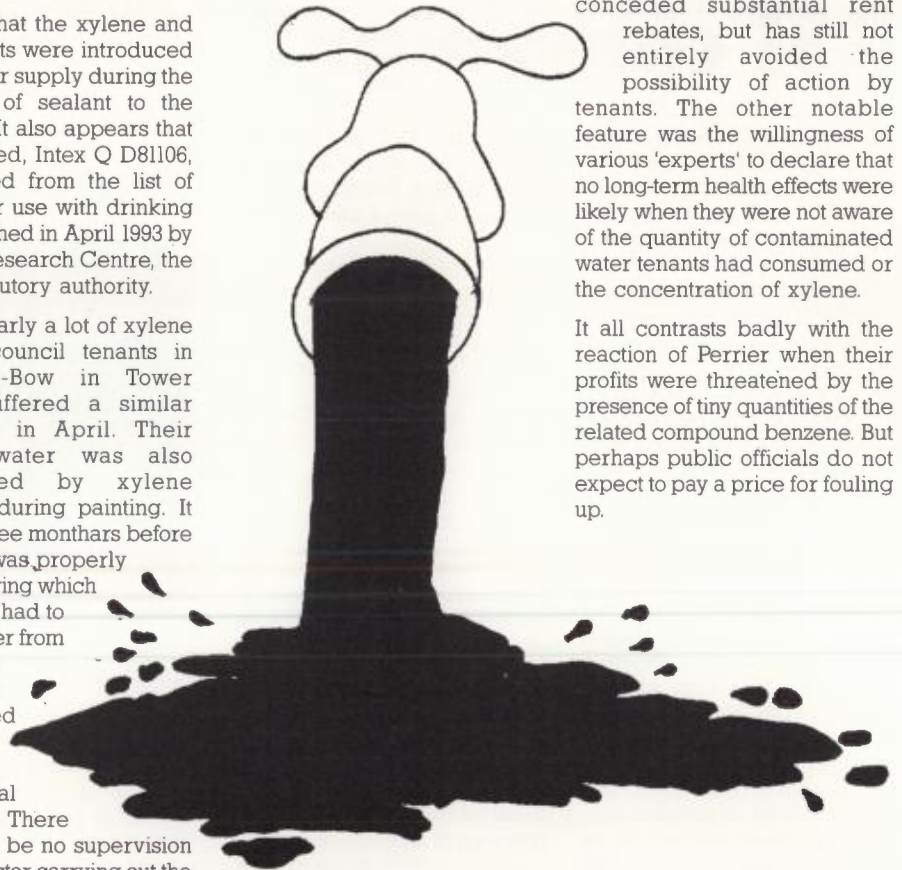
It appears that the xylene and other solvents were introduced into the water supply during the application of sealant to the water tank. It also appears that the paint used, Intex Q D81106, was removed from the list of materials for use with drinking water published in April 1993 by the Water Research Centre, the relevant statutory authority.

There is clearly a lot of xylene about as council tenants in Bromley-by-Bow in Tower Hamlets suffered a similar experience in April. Their drinking water was also contaminated by xylene introduced during painting. It took over three months before the supply was properly restored, during which time tenants had to get their water from a standpipe. The incident demonstrated the present shambolic nature of local government. There appeared to be no supervision of the contractor carrying out the

work, who was promptly sacked and who may be prosecuted. The various levels of local government officials acted independently of each other, no-one knew what was happening,

and overall managerial authority seemed not to exist. Not until angry tenants forced a meeting with the Chief Executive and other officials were matters finally sorted out. Faced with legal proceedings, the Council conceded substantial rent rebates, but has still not entirely avoided the possibility of action by tenants. The other notable feature was the willingness of various 'experts' to declare that no long-term health effects were likely when they were not aware of the quantity of contaminated water tenants had consumed or the concentration of xylene.

It all contrasts badly with the reaction of Perrier when their profits were threatened by the presence of tiny quantities of the related compound benzene. But perhaps public officials do not expect to pay a price for fouling up.



CSC slams Crown Prosecution Service

The Construction Safety Campaign (CSC) has severely criticised the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for refusing to hold a manslaughter investigation into the St John's Bridge Disaster which killed two workers and injured four others. On 13 June 1992 at St John's Station, Lewisham, the Ipswich-based Tilbury Douglas construction company was carrying out demolition work for British Rail (BR). At 10.30am the 30 foot, three-arched road bridge which they were demolishing collapsed killing

two workers and injuring four others, one seriously. Nicholas Scott (22) and Frank Warren (42), both from Suffolk, lost their lives under thousands of tonnes of rubble in the disaster. Approximately 40 firemen and several teams of rescuers with thermal-imaging cameras, noise detectors and diggers spent over four hours trying to rescue the men.

The inquest into the deaths of the two workers was to be held at Southwark Coroners Court earlier this year but the Coroner adjourned the inquest after new

evidence was presented and passed the papers to the CPS.

It has been reported since the accident that Tilbury Douglas is not a member of the National Federation of Demolition Contractors. BR requires demolition work to be carried out by members of the Federation and the contract with Tilbury Douglas stated that the company was to sub-contract the work to an approved contractor. This has been contested by Tilbury Douglas who say they have done 'up to 50 demolitions for BR'.

It has also been disclosed that a BR film crew was making a film on the safe demolition of bridges when the disaster occurred. This film is reported to reveal that a BR Safety Officer was on site at the time of the accident! It appears that demolition started while workers were still under the bridge. This raises questions about safe systems of work as required by the Health and Safety At Work Act and about the competence of Tilbury Douglas, BR and the BR Safety Officer. Why did no-one stop the demolition until the workers had been moved out of danger?

WORKPLACE CHEMICALS AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Very little research on the reproductive hazards of chemicals was done before the mid-1970s and there is still intense debate about the reliability of available research techniques. However, there are at least 200 chemicals for which there is published evidence of reproductive hazards. This factsheet, the second in a series of three on reproductive hazards (see *Daily Hazards* 39 and 41) gives information on the main chemical hazards and how to avoid or reduce exposure.

Chemicals can affect the reproductive health of both men and women both before and after conception. There can be loss of libido, impotence, reduced sperm count and infertility in men. Women can suffer loss of libido, infertility and disturbances in ovulation, menstruation, implantation and placental development. Chemicals which can cause genetic damage in either men or women can lead to miscarriages, stillbirths, birth defects (low birth weights, deformities, chromosome abnormalities), genetic diseases and cancer in offspring, retarded physical and mental development in offspring and infant mortality. Some chemicals absorbed via breast milk may also result in infant mortality and retarded development. The following list of chemicals comprises those for which reproductive hazard is proven or highly likely. The list of suspects is much longer.

Anaesthetics

Anaesthetic gases, mainly nitric oxide and, less conclusively, halothane, are suspected of causing spontaneous abortions; to a lesser extent they are also implicated in congenital malformations in offspring. There is evidence that the pregnancies of the partners of men exposed to anaesthetics are also more prone to end in spontaneous abortions. Those most at risk are operating room personnel including cleaners, dentists and their assistants, and veterinary workers.

Carbon monoxide

Exposure to carbon monoxide affects fertility in women. Exposure during pregnancy can lead to foetal death or brain damage in survivors. Carbon monoxide fumes are the by-product of a number of fuel-burning processes such as petrol and diesel engines and gas heaters. It is formed in small amounts by photocopiers and laser printers. It is a significant product of tobacco smoking.

Carbon disulphide

Carbon disulphide is a solvent which is used in the manufacture of plastics and also in a number of other manufacturing processes. It causes sexual dysfunction in both men and women. It is toxic to foetuses and can pass into mother's milk producing neurological disturbances in offspring.

Formaldehyde

Evidence is accumulating that exposure to formaldehyde can cause sterility in women. There is also evidence of menstrual effects and effects on pregnancy. There are a large number of reports of harmful effects in animals. Those particularly at risk are hospital personnel, furniture workers, construction workers and those involved in the manufacture of plastics, paints, foams and resins.

Glycol ethers

Despite strenuous efforts at denial by the electronics industry, some glycol ethers (also known as cellosolves) have been shown to cause miscarriages by both inhalation and skin contact. They are also implicated in low birth weights

and malformations. They also interfere with male reproductive capacity. Glycol ethers are used as degreasers in the manufacture of silicon chips. They are also used as solvents in a number of other manufacturing processes and as anti-freeze agents for petrol and other fuels.

Lead

Lead and its compounds are potent reproductive toxins for both men and women. They have been associated with sterility, menstrual disturbance, impotence, damage to sperm, miscarriages, stillbirths, increased infant mortality, low birthweight, slow infant development and infant retardation. Exposure before conception can result in reproductive failure and maldevelopment. Effects appear at low levels of exposure. In addition to workers involved in manufacturing processes, those at risk include welders, painters and people exposed to petrol fumes.

Metals

Many other metals in addition to lead are reproductive toxins. Particularly dangerous are cadmium and its compounds (kills or damages foetuses; affects postnatal development;



causes testicular damage) and mercury and its compounds (menstrual disturbances and reduced ovulation; possible cause of spontaneous abortions through both paternal and maternal exposure; central nervous system defects in offspring; reduced libido and potency in men). Other metals suspected of reproductive effects are arsenic, beryllium, manganese, selenium, tellurium and thallium.

Pesticides

A variety of pesticides are known reproductive toxins. A

non-exhaustive list of common pesticides with some evidence of reproductive hazard is: dibromochloropropane, DDT, dieldrin, aldrin, lindane, malathion, parathion, carbaryl, 2,4-D, 2,4,5-T, paraquat, simazine, atrazine, zineb, captan and pentachlorophenol. The list is only limited by the lack of research. At risk are chemical manufacturing workers, farmworkers, parks and gardens workers, construction workers (and a host of other people subject to non-occupational exposure).

Pharmaceuticals

A large number of medicinal drugs are now known to have adverse reproductive effects. This can pose a risk for the workers who manufacture or handle them. Particular hazards are known for the manufacture of oral contraceptives and the handling of anti-cancer drugs.

Polychlorinated biphenyls

Polychlorinated biphenyls are electrically non-conducting fluids with a variety of industrial applications. High levels are found in breast milk and this has been related to underdevelopment in children. There are also reports of menstrual problems.

Solvents

Organochlorine solvents (e.g. trichloroethylene) are associated with spontaneous abortions and the development of cancer in offspring. Aromatic hydrocarbons are also associated with reduced fertility, spontaneous abortions, malformations and low birthweight. There is evidence for cancer in offspring resulting from paternal exposure. The commonly used thinner methyl ethyl ketone can damage embryos and foetuses. Groups particularly at risk are dry cleaning workers, painters and laboratory workers.

Vinyl chloride

Paternal exposure to vinyl chloride monomer can cause central nervous system defects in offspring. There are conflicting reports on whether paternal exposure can cause spontaneous abortions. Vinyl chloride monomer is a cancer-causing agent which is known to cross the placenta. The

chemical is used in the production of plastics and process workers are most at risk but people living in the vicinity of plants may also be affected.

Protection in the workplace

The safe use of chemicals in the workplace is governed by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations (see *Daily Hazard* 24) and by other legislation referring to particular chemicals (lead and vinyl chloride being examples of the latter). Employers are obliged to carry out an assessment of the risk of chemicals and processes and then either introduce safer materials and methods OR, if that is not possible, control the process OR, if that is not possible, provide protective equipment. In some cases health surveillance of exposed workers should be carried out. Union safety representatives should be consulted on assessments and on the safety procedures to be carried out. Try for substitution every time.

The key step in assessments is acquiring information on the hazards of chemicals. For reproductive hazards, never rely on the information in manufacturers' or suppliers' safety data sheets, always seek information from your union or other independent source. Try and obtain information about effects on women, men and offspring. Establish the safe conditions for a) pregnant women and b) both women and men planning to start a baby. Wherever possible, argue for the option of people in these categories to move off potentially hazardous processes onto safe work. Demand the management provides tests of exposure to known or suspected reproductive toxins.

Under the Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations and the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act, there are general rights for pregnant women at work. These will be dealt with in the final factsheet in this series in *Daily Hazard* 41.

Key information sources

S.M. Barlow and F.M. Sullivan, *Reproductive Hazards of Industrial Chemicals*, Academic Press (1982).
A.C. Fletcher, *Reproductive Hazards at Work*, ASTMS/Equal Opportunities Commission (1985).

Centre book launch: rocket for HSE

At a press conference attended by trade union, health and safety, local and national press organisations, the London Hazards Centre launched its new book *VDU Work and the Hazards to Health*. Maggie Alexander, one of the book's authors, explained how a large proportion of the London Hazards Centre's case work

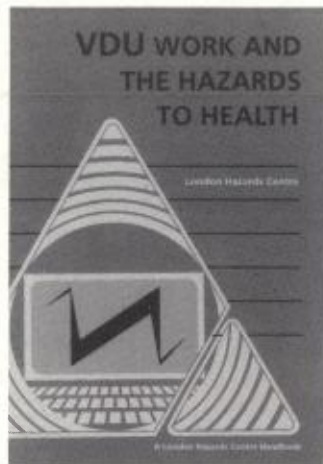
of the long-term consequences of an occupational injury that has brought an abrupt end to her chosen means of earning a living. Fiona Murie, one of the books' co-authors presented a scathing critique of the flaws and loopholes in the new VDU Regulations and on the poor record of enforcement in an employment sector which the



included workers concerned about the effects of VDU work on their health. There was a need for up-to-date information on preventive measures and the law.

The book includes a comprehensive chapter on reproductive hazards, a subject of considerable concern to many inquirers. The effects may include menstrual disorders, impairment of both male and female fertility, increased risk of miscarriage and birth defects. Evidence was presented to support the argument that adverse effects cannot be ruled out, notwithstanding official complacency.

Barbara Dalzell of the NUJ RSI Sufferers' Support Group, herself chronically injured by RSI, spoke graphically of the devastating effects on health, career, home and social life, and



HSE has declared a low risk activity.

The book is recommended to all VDU workers, health and safety representatives, health and safety advisers and specialists as a handbook which provides concise information on all aspects of VDU work and clear recommendations on ways to prevent VDU-related ill-health.

PUBLICATIONS

- ▲ **VDU Work and the Hazards to Health.** £6.50
- ▲ **Protecting the Community: A worker's guide to health and safety in Europe.** £9.95
- ▲ **Basic Health and Safety: Workers' rights and how to win them.** £6.00
- ▲ **Repetition Strain Injuries: Hidden harm from over-use.** £3*/£6.00
- ▲ **Out in the Open** (supplement to *Repetition Strain Injuries*). £1 (free with *Repetition Strain Injuries*).
- ▲ **Sick Building Syndrome: Causes, effects and control.** £4.50
- ▲ **Fluorescent Lighting: A health hazard overhead.** £2*/£5
- ▲ **Toxic Treatments: Wood preservative hazards at work and in the home.** £5.95
- ▲ **After the Sprayer: investigation and treatment of ill-health caused by wood preservatives and how to get help.** Factsheet. £1.
- ▲ **Asbestos Factpack** (People's Asbestos Action Campaign). £3*/£5
- ▲ **Factpack:** Set of factsheets from the Daily Hazard. £5.00
- ▲ **Daily Hazard** complete run: £25

* Price to community/tenants/union groups.

Prices include postage. Discounts for 10 or more copies.

HAZLIT is London Hazards Centre's library database. For information about on-line access, contact the Centre.

CAHIL meeting on safety reps' rights

Health and safety representatives' rights are under attack from all sides but work on health and safety remains a major organising issue at workplaces. This was the conclusion reached by reps from the printing, construction, clerical industries and firefighting service at a meeting organised by CAHIL (Campaign Against Hazards in London) on 16 July 1993 and sponsored by Southwark, Lambeth, and Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Councils.

Government cuts to TUC training funds, derecognition of trade unions (and therefore safety reps) by employers and the fear of unemployment all combined to make improving workplace conditions an uphill struggle. Reps are also sometimes faced with 'macho' attitudes from male workers who make fun of union health and safety concerns. However, when challenged, management are in some cases carrying out their responsibilities, training workers and taking steps to maintain a healthy and safe working environment.

CAHIL will soon be adopting its programme of events for the rest of 1993 and into the new year. Details and membership application forms can be obtained from 21B Theberton Street, London N1 0QY.



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