

# THE DAILY HAZARD

## Action in Ascham St.

Residents in Ascham Street and the surrounding area in Kentish Town are continuing their battle for safety in the face of the aggressive redevelopment of a toxic site in their midst (see *Daily Hazard* No. 56).

The site was formerly an electroplating works and is now being converted into a nursing home. The old works was riddled with asbestos and the underlying soil is contaminated by toxic chemicals such as carcinogenic cadmium, chromium and nickel compounds and cyanides. Local residents, organised into the Ascham Anti-Contamination Action group, fought their first war over planning permission for conversion of the site. When this was finally lost, they turned their efforts towards minimising the spread of pollutants across their neighbourhood.

But, as residents discovered to their fury and alarm, the main contractors Prestoplan pressed on with scant regard for their needs. Residents also said the law and Camden Council gave them very little protection or help.

The Council set up a working party of residents' and contractors' representatives which was supposed to consult on the demolition and clearance of the site. But work started before the working party had even met.

Tenants were then horrified to observe workers without any protective gear smash up an asbestos cement roof with pickaxes. Asbestos debris was left on the ground for several days before being bagged up. Bags of asbestos were left in an insecure area for several days before being removed. All this was captured on camera but there seems, as yet, to be no response from the authorities.

Residents then picketed the site and generated widespread

Photo: Bernard Crawley



*Protesting outside the Ascham Street site.*

media coverage. Work stopped for a week and company representatives began to show a slightly more accommodating attitude. But this was more a public relations display than any real intention to reach agreement. They wanted the work carried out on schedule with as little interference as possible.

For example, Prestoplan refused to release the results of soil tests. These were passed on to Quentin Givens, Camden's Pollution Team Leader, but he respected the company's desire for confidentiality. From what information could be gleaned, it looked as though the 'hot spots' on the site were very, very hot indeed.

There was every reason, therefore, to be worried by the emission of toxic dust during soil removal. As lorries transported the soil out of the area, a fair proportion of it ended up on local streets and children, the sick and the old were exposed to the toxic chemicals.

While the company promised to carry out daily air tests to check dust levels, there was no sign that these were actually being performed. Lorries were loaded with soil outside the site in an enclosure which blocked off the street. Residents kept up the pressure and managed to win some concessions. The lorries were covered with tarpaulins and the enclosure was covered in plastic sheeting, resulting in some reduction in the dust and mud.

Another bone of contention was clean-up work around the perimeter wall. Residents constantly found that work was carried out at times and in places and by methods to which they had not agreed. All this created a climate of mistrust between the developers and the local people. Local activist Nandita Dowson comments: 'The working party is a farce. You cannot believe a word they say and a lot of it is intended to soft soap us into letting them do as they want.'

If residents have been less than enthused by the performance of Council officials, they are equally unimpressed by the attitude of the Labour Party. Camden M.P. Frank Dobson, the Health Minister, is involved but his office says there is little he can do. It was noted, wryly, that Labour Party candidates in the recent elections put out leaflets claiming to support the Action Group but did not distribute them in the area affected. Residents are determined to fight on to protect their neighbourhood. While they have learned that everything is loaded in

favour of the developers, they can tilt the balance back through their own collective action.

Photo: Bernard Crawley



*Asbestos roofing removal at the Ascham Street site.*



# Islington stewards act on chemicals

In 1987, Islington Council entered into an agreement with the borough trade unions on the use of chemicals by Council employees. The Council undertook to:

- carry out an audit of all substances in use and storage
- prepare standard safety data sheets
- jointly with the unions, draw up a list of substances with agreed uses and safe working practices
- provide adequate levels of training and supervision in consultation with the unions
- where concern is expressed about the hazards of a chemical, not to use it until after consultation with the unions.

A crucial feature of the agreement was that the Council undertook not to purchase, store

or use any cancer-causing substance. This was extended to cover mutagens (chemicals which cause genetic change) and teratogens (compounds which can cause birth defects). The agreement sets out the steps needed to identify suspect chemicals, acknowledged that substantial resources would be needed to do the job properly and even suggested that extra staff would be taken on to carry out the work.

Regrettably, the agreement was never carried out in any meaningful way. With the pressure on local government finance, trade union organisation and employment conditions, it became more and more of a dead letter.

Now, however, Islington shop stewards have decided to revive the agreement and campaign for it to be properly implemented. As UCATT shop steward Peter Farrell explains: 'There is no doubt that many of

our members are being made ill by the chemicals they are handling and we have to do something about it. We have a wonderful agreement, all we have to do is make it work.'

As a first step, the stewards persuaded the Council's training unit to let the London Hazards Centre run a special two-day chemicals course specially designed for people without a chemical background. This was a crash course intended to bring people up to speed on a) what made chemicals dangerous and b) what steps are needed to make them safe. While it was hoped that management representatives and stewards from the white-collar unions would attend, in the event it was only representatives from the manual unions who were able to make it.

As part of the course, the stewards discussed how to raise the issue of chemical

safety throughout the Council health and safety structures and their frustrations at the failure of management to respond in a positive way. This led to the preparation of an action plan.

One of the ideas that was kicked around was setting up a Union Approved List or a Union Banned List of chemicals if it proved to be impossible to get any movement from the management. If the normal consultation mechanisms did not yield results, the unions could advise their members directly on which chemicals were safe to use and which were not.

As one of the stewards remarked: 'We are going to give the Council every opportunity to bring chemical safety up to scratch. But if all else fails, we will have to look at ways we can go forward ourselves. Now we have the knowledge and confidence to be able to do this.'

## Workers Memorial Day '98 BAN ASBESTOS - NOW



*Pictured is MSF Safety Rep Glyn Baker leading the protest march held in London on Workers Memorial Day, April 28th. Glyn presented a wreath to Jenny Bacon Director General HSE in recognition of those killed, disabled, injured or made unwell by their job. Protesters joined with Glyn in demanding, at the top of their voices, the government ban asbestos now and fight the Canadian government's efforts to use the international trade courts to force us to use the poison they peddle.*

## Stop the Canadian government peddling poison

After months of rumour, the Canadian government has finally approached the World Trade Organisation to protest at the French ban on white asbestos imports

The Canadian government has been trying to stop a forthcoming Europe wide asbestos import ban to protect its asbestos export business in Asia and elsewhere. Their opening gambit is to challenge the recent French ban.

If the European parliament follows up its promise to ban, this will give safety campaigners around the world a strong argument for bans elsewhere.

Because of all the back room wheeler dealing that's been going on the ban in the UK and in Europe has faltered and may

need a push from safety campaigners.

In line with this UNISON has launched a campaign encouraging members to write to their MP and relevant ministers urging the UK government to push forward with the ban in the UK and in Europe.

The London Hazards Centre supports this effort and suggests all concerned write to their MP and relevant minister as well as their union General Secretary calling for an immediate ban and resistance to the Canadian efforts in the international trade courts.

International trade agreements should not give governments the right to peddle poisons around the globe.



## Alternatives to asbestos

**There is no single product in day to day use at work or at home that needs to be made from or contain deadly asbestos – yet over 3000 workplace and home based products contain this poison.**

It is possible to eliminate the use of asbestos by redesigning the job or product, or by using another, safer material.

Manufacturers make safer alternative fibre products and can control the fibre size so they cannot be breathed in and do harm. Asbestos fibre is added to cement to increase its elasticity but non-asbestos fibres can be used to do the same job. Alternatively, fibrous cement can be completely replaced by using metal or plastic to form the section.

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations Reg. 8 says 'prevention of such exposure (to asbestos) shall be achieved, where it is practicable, by substituting a substance which does not create a risk or creates a lesser risk than that created by asbestos.'

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations also make it clear that 'safer substitutes' must be used wherever possible.

Three major UK unions, UCATT, GMB and UNISON are actively encouraging their members not to use asbestos based products – and their members are following this instruction, demanding safer substitutes. Members of other unions should check their union's policy.

Some of the products used in place of asbestos are not entirely risk free.

### Asbestos alternatives

**Manufactured inorganic fibres (MIF)**  
The greatest strength of manufactured fibres is that often the diameter of fibre can be made so they are not respirable (breathable).

Ceramic fibre is used mainly as a high temperature insulation material and is usually found insulating furnaces. It is also used for ropes. There is often no control over fibre diameter and most forms can contain fibres that are hazardous. They are a cancer hazard.

Glass fibre is now believed to be as hazardous as chrysotile by many experts, although this is disputed by the industry. Previous research by the London Hazards Centre revealed a cancer risk to the throat.

Many fibreglass products contain fibres of a breathable size. It is used as an insulation product in general construction, roofs and walls and as a

manufacturing product in preformed units, car bodies, sheeting etc. It is a cancer hazard as well as causing skin and eye irritation.

Glass and stone wool products are loose conglomerates of fibres with oils and binders added to maintain the shape of the product and reduce the generation of dusts. They are used mainly for thermal insulation. Both contain a range of fibres which are respirable and are cancer hazards.

### Naturally occurring crystalline fibres and other minerals

Wollastonite is a naturally occurring calcium silicate crystalline material. Exposures to this and other similar materials have resulted in respiratory symptoms such as inflammation, fibrosis, pneumoconiosis, lung function alterations, emphysema, pleural calcification, and obstructive airway disease.

Perlite is expanded volcanic rock and is mixed with other mineral fibres and bindings to form insulation board.

### Natural organic fibre

Cotton fibres can cause long term ill-health effects which sometimes are diagnosed late. Cotton causes the lung disease byssinosis.

Shredded paper can be used as an insulating wall fill. It can irritate the eye, nose and throat.

Cellulose fibres can also be used for insulation etc. Available evidence shows their cancer stimulating effects to be significantly smaller than those from asbestos. Little is known, however, of the way that cellulose fibres may contribute to other diseases of the respiratory tract.

### Manufactured organic fibre

Kevlar (para-aramid) fibre. A recent report to the European Directorate DGIII said: 'The reports of the UK HSE and, most recently, the conclusions of WHO and IARC suggest that para-aramid fibres are likely to pose a lower risk of pulmonary fibrosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma than chrysotile asbestos.' The size of the fibre is easily controlled and it has qualities of toughness and thermal insulation. Not commonly encountered as it has limited, specialist uses.

Polyvinylalcohol (PVA) Fibres do not readily split into finer fibres says the independent research organisation the organisation Environmental Resources Management. It thinks it safe to conclude that PVA fibres, of the

diameters used commercially, are unlikely to pose a significant risk of the diseases which have been associated with durable respirable fibres.

Polystyrene can be used a loose fill insulation or bought in sheets. Will give off toxic fumes when heated.

### Substitute hazards

Some asbestos substitutes are also made from fibrous materials and a range of hazards arise from the fact that all fibres can be:

- **breathed in**, contaminating the surfaces of the nose, mouth, throat, larynx or lung. Fibres which are bio-persistent (staying in the body for years without changing) can also travel through the body, they cause damage and cancers wherever they are. It is by this means that asbestos and some glass fibre gets into the lubricated lining between the ribs and the lungs (the mesothelium). Relatively low levels of dust exposure stops the body's defence mechanisms in the nose, throat and lungs operating efficiently, increasing the risk of irritation, infection or allergy.
- **ingested** because they are on food or spittle which is swallowed. Again fibres may damage the sensitive inner surfaces of the oesophagus, stomach and gut causing lesions and cancers.
- **contact hazards** with skin and eyes. This can cause thickening of tissue, and basal cell cancers (a kind of skin cancer) at one end of the ill-health scale and itching and irritation at the other. This prickly skin is especially associated with fibre glass work.

### Official Advice

The World Health Organisation (WHO), the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have expressed opinions on fibre contamination and make a variety of recommendations:

- As far as possible manufacturers should ensure fibre sizes that are not breathable (non-inspirable), or at least not so small as to get deep into the lung (non-respirable).
- If small-diameter respirable fibres are necessary then they should not

resist the body's clearing mechanisms (be bio-persistent) or exhibit other toxic effects. N.B. regular daily exposure to substances that are not bio-persistent means that the dose is persistent as it constantly is renewed daily in the body even though earlier exposures are dissolving away.

- All fibres that are respirable and bio-persistent must undergo testing for toxicity and for their ability to cause cancers (carcinogenicity).

The UK Hazards Campaign says that exposures to fibres whose health risks have not been completely investigated should be temporarily banned until better data is available and informed decisions can be made on their safe use.

### Where asbestos can be substituted

- cement for pipes, guttering, drains etc.
- cement sheeting for roofs and walls
- floor tiles
- pipe lagging
- all forms of thermal insulation ceiling and wall decorative products
- packing products
- gaskets and seals
- vehicle clutch plates
- vehicle brakes linings and pads
- cavity wall insulation
- ironing board hot pads
- insulation in cookers
- parts of night storage heaters
- fire blankets
- and many, many more

## References

### Fibre alternatives to asbestos in the Nordic countries.

Nordic Council of Ministers. £7.50. HMSO. ISBN 9291205362.

### Manufactured mineral fibres (MMF's).

London Hazards Centre factsheet.

### Asbestos in the home – Part 1 and Part 2.

London Hazards Centre factsheet.

### Asbestos hazards handbook.

London Hazards Centre. £12.00 plus £1.50 p+p (£5.00 plus .50p p+p to community groups, union branches etc.)



# Safety reps conference report now available

Safety reps and speakers at conference.

A report is now available of our conference 'Making safety reps more effective' held at the TUC earlier this year. Nearly 200 safety reps from all over the country attended.

Key speakers were Rose Dunne, Chair of the Construction Safety Campaign, Alan Dalton, National Health and Safety Officer of the T&GWU, Lynette Rispoli Unison Ealing, Graham Peterson SERTUC and Jim Marshall GMB.

page); roving safety reps; the 20th anniversary of, and forthcoming review of, the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations later in 1998.

Copies of the report will be sent to those who attended. Anyone else wanting a copy should write to the Centre enclosing an A4 sized envelope with a 26p stamp.

Topics covered were: the forthcoming fairness at work legislation and how that will affect safety reps; making your employer comply with the law; safety reps being given the right to issue provisional improvement notices (PIN's, see elsewhere on this



Photo: Mick Holder LHC



Photo: Mick Holder LHC

## PINs motion for conferences

The London Hazards Centre was asked at our recent safety reps conference to prepare a model motion for safety reps to put forward to union conferences on the issue of PINs (Provisional Improvement Notices).

PINs are issued by safety reps in Australia when there is a safety dispute with their employer. If there is no resolution after 14 days a safety inspector comes to the workplace and adjudicates the issue. In the majority of cases the inspector finds in favour of the safety rep and improvements have to be made (see *Daily Hazard* No.57).

The following motion (or one similarly worded) can be put on branch agendas this year for conferences next year. Safety reps should investigate whether there is any possibility of getting the motion as an emergency on this year's conference agenda.

### Suggested motion:

'This Conference urges the government to tackle the

serious lack of health and safety enforcement in the workplace and to recognise that Safety Representatives have a more thorough knowledge of health and safety management than many of their line managers, business managers and employers.

Changes must be made to the safety representatives' functions defined in the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations 1977 by including the additional function of issuing, to employers and/or their managers, Provisional Improvement Notices (PINs).

PINs are currently issued by safety reps in Australia when there is a safety dispute with their employer. If there is no resolution after 14 days a safety inspector comes to workplace and adjudicates the issue.

Immediately following this conference this Union will allocate sufficient resources to actively campaign to secure this important workplace function for trade union safety representatives.'

### OUT IN THE AUTUMN

## Chemical Hazards Handbook

The Centre's next handbook is scheduled to appear in Autumn 1998. It will be about chemicals at work and is aimed at safety representatives and others who do not have a chemistry background. It is intended to provide a broad understanding of how to deal with issues of chemical safety at work

Chapters will cover how chemicals act, how to measure the danger, what legislation applies, the prevention and control of hazards and campaigning and taking action. The book will not be a list of hazardous chemicals but will give safety representatives the tools to interpret information about chemicals and form a plan of action to protect their members. It will enable representatives to assess the reliability of chemical information provided by employers, manufacturers and suppliers, and expert sources and the safety measures which are based on this information.

Details of pricing and special pre-publication offers will appear in the next issue of the *Daily Hazard*.

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We'd like to thank UNISON and Poptel whose support has allowed us to set up this site



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