



Risks Newsletter



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UNION NEWS

RMT angered by runaways exclusion

Rail union RMT is seeking urgent talks with Network Rail after discovering it had been excluded from discussions on how to protect track workers against runaway vehicles. RMT expressed "anger and astonishment" at the

failure to consult the union and its safety reps. It said the result was a “wholly inadequate” strategy to address the problem. Since four of its members were killed at Tebay in February 2004, RMT says there have been at least 12 runaway incidents. The union is seeking additional protection for track workers, including the use of devices to protect worksites on stretches of track where the gradient poses a significant risk. “I have written three times to Network Rail since August seeking urgent discussions on additional protection for track workers, and I have not even had the courtesy of a reply,” RMT general secretary Bob Crow said. “Our safety reps are furious that the company has attempted to draft a policy without seeking their views, and it is hardly surprising that the document they have drafted is wholly inadequate. I have asked Network Rail to explain why we have been denied the involvement we are legally entitled to, and why they have chosen to devise a crucially important safety policy in secret.”

- [RMT news release](#).

Unions make unsafe employers pay

Trade union legal services continues to provide crucial support for injured workers. Lorry driver Kevin Reed received £115,477.51 in compensation after he suffered an injury to his neck and back in a career-ending road accident. The Unite member was working for Scottish and Courage Brewery when his vehicle turned into a ditch as a result of a defect on the road surface. The local authority had not applied hard core beneath the tarmac surface of the road. GMB member Maureen Deighan, a home carer with the London Borough of Hillingdon, received £4,000 compensation after she slipped on a wet bathroom floor in a client’s home, sustaining injuries to her hand, arm and back. Complaints had previously been made about safety in the house – a blocked drain caused the build up of water on the floor. Kent panel beater Michael Homan, 62, who suffered a serious wrist injury repairing a fire engine, was awarded £135,000 in an out-of-court settlement with his former

employer, Kent County Council. The Unite member was repairing a fire engine shutter when his left hand was pulled into the shutter and crushed. He had to undergo surgery to fuse his wrist, leaving him with permanent loss of movement. EXEL Logistics warehouse worker John Scullion, 46, slipped on a tomato that had been left on the floor and suffered leg and groin injuries. The Unite member received a £2,500 payout. RAF aircraft technician Luke Morgan, 29, received a £6,000 payout from his former employer, the Defence Aviation Repair Agency (DARA). The Unite member suffered a hernia when carrying out maintenance work on a Tornado ZA547 aircraft. He was required to enter the fuel tank head first and then twist his body, a manoeuvre that his solicitor said “probably required the skill of a contortionist” and that caused the injury.

- Pattinson and Brewer news releases on the [lorry driver](#), [home carer](#) and [panel beater settlements](#). Thompsons Solicitors news releases on the [tomato slip](#) and [hernia settlements](#).

Ergo cabs follow union campaign

Rail firm Freightliner is improving train cabs after a campaign by drivers’ union ASLEF. Union general secretary Keith Norman says the company’s production director has given an assurance the company is “more than happy to involve ASLEF as much as possible in the ergonomics of any new cab design.” The union leader commented: “Freightliner has responded in a positive way to the concerns the union has raised in our Squash campaign – which called for radically improved cab conditions that are safe, healthy and modern” ([Risks 299](#)). The company has ordered 30 locomotives from US firm GE Transportation Systems. It has also said it will improve seats, blinds and air cooling on existing locos. “We have to accept that the time scales for change cannot be delivered as soon as our members would like,” said Keith Norman. “But Freightliner have shown themselves committed to improvements in cab conditions and has

pledged itself to genuine consultation as this is developed. Freightliner has shown the way. We will be looking to other freight companies to match these initiatives.”

- [ASLEF news release](#) and [Squash campaign](#).

FBU demands action on firework ‘bombs’

Firefighters’ union FBU has called for an overhaul of the regulations that cover the import, manufacture, transport and storage of fireworks in the UK. The union was speaking out on the first anniversary of the deaths of two firefighters in an explosion at Marlie Farm in East Sussex on 3 December 2006 ([Risks 286](#)). It said the investigation into the explosion uncovered a number of other incidents involving fireworks where lives had been lost and many people injured. The union added that emergency services and the public are being put in needless danger because of confused regulation, lack of monitoring and the poor labelling of imported fireworks. FBU general secretary Matt Wrack said: “In fires containers packed with fireworks can cause the same devastation as some military bombs and artillery shells. Despite the dangers already identified there has been no action from government, the Health and Safety Executive or the other regulatory agencies.” He added: “Government and its agencies have done nothing to properly address what we have already learned about firework linked explosions at incidents in the UK and other countries. Emergency services and the public are being put needlessly at risk by this inaction. The current regime is too complex and isn’t working. We need one agency in overall control. The regulating agencies need to have a comprehensive programme of inspection and enforcement to achieve an acceptable level of risk.”

- [FBU news release](#), [BBC News Online](#).

Union welcomes pleural plaques move

Construction union UCATT have given a “cautious welcome” to the UK government’s commitment to examine a recent decision of the Law Lords that asbestos campaigners have labelled a “travesty of justice” and “a disgrace” ([Risks 328](#)). In October the Law Lords ruled that sufferers of pleural plaques would no longer be eligible for compensation. Pleural plaques are scarring of the lungs. Some of those diagnosed later develop the incurable lung cancer mesothelioma or other asbestos related diseases. Michael Clapham, chair of the all party asbestos committee, raised the issue in parliament on 3 December. He was told the issue would be closely examined by government. James Plaskitt, the parliamentary undersecretary of state at the Department of Work and Pensions, said: “We want to consider the ruling of the court and we need to see what happens as the issue is debated in the Scottish parliament.” The Scottish government announced last month it was to introduce a bill to reverse the House of Lords decision. UCATT general secretary Alan Ritchie commented: “The government commitment to look at this issue should be given a cautious welcome. However every day this ruling goes unchallenged, will mean that more people will be undiagnosed and uncompensated for industrial injuries sustained needlessly. Victims of pleural plaques like all asbestos sufferers deserve justice.”

- [UCATT news release](#), [Oldham Chronicle](#).

OTHER NEWS

Scots to put right pleural plaques snub

Scottish ministers are to overturn a House of Lords ruling preventing workers suing employers over asbestos-related pleural plaques. The ruling prevented compensation claims for pleural plaques, a scarring of the lungs, arguing that it was technically not a disease ([Risks 328](#)). But Scottish justice secretary Kenny MacAskill said those with the condition had an increased risk of

diseases like mesothelioma. The Scottish government is to bring forward a bill to make the changes. The planned measures, which would take effect from the date of the Lords judgment on 17 October, would mean that those negligently exposed to asbestos and who were diagnosed with pleural plaques could claim damages. Kenny MacAskill said: “Pleural plaques in anyone exposed to asbestos mean they have a greatly increased lifetime risk of developing mesothelioma and a small but significantly increased risk of developing bronchial carcinoma. This will mean that people diagnosed with this condition will have to live with the worry of possible future ill health for the rest of their lives. That is why this Scottish government is to take steps to reverse the House of Lords judgment and ensure that people with pleural plaques can continue to raise an action for damages. We have listened to the many voices who have campaigned on behalf of asbestos sufferers.” He added: “This government takes this issue very seriously and I hope this move will bring some relief to people living with this condition.” Adrian Budgen of law firm Irwin Mitchell criticised the “postcode lottery” on asbestos payouts. He said: “Whilst this is very good news for Scottish asbestos victims I am deeply dismayed that the government will not acknowledge the Lords decision as a massive injustice to hard working and innocent victims of this deadly material.”

- [Scottish government news release](#). [Irwin Mitchell Solicitors news release](#). [Pattinson and Brewer news release](#). [ABI news release](#). [BBC News Online](#).

No one is safe from asbestos

A hairdresser and a theatre worker are among the latest victims of asbestos. Carol Heaton, 60, died from the asbestos cancer mesothelioma after working in a hair salon for 33 years, an inquest heard. The Sheffield inquest heard that the Health and Safety Laboratory has already tested emissions from heating elements in hair salons which used to be insulated with asbestos and

concluded there was no appreciable risk.” Consultant histopathologist Dr Kim Suvarna said an autopsy revealed the victim had a relatively low level of asbestos fibres in her body but it showed she had been exposed to asbestos. He said he was unaware of other cases in hairdressers. However, they do exist. A January 2005 inquest, for example, recorded a verdict of death from an industrial disease on another hairdresser, Janet Watson, who died aged 59 from mesothelioma ([Risks 191](#)). Asbestos groups and personal injury solicitors report they have dealt with several similar hairdresser cases nationwide. The problem can also affect workers in the arts. Theatre worker Gloria Dawson, 69, was killed by a crumbling fire safety stage curtain, an inquest heard. Every time the fire curtain went up and down, it released asbestos. She died of malignant mesothelioma in 2005. Berkshire coroner Peter Bedford recorded a verdict of death from industrial disease. Reading Borough Council said all asbestos had been removed from the theatre in 2003.

- [Daily Mail](#). [Daily Mirror](#). [The Times](#).

Asbestos case settled in four months

Former shipyard worker Charles Cochran, 67, has been awarded more than £150,000 in compensation after developing the asbestos cancer mesothelioma. This case was settled just four months after the claim was made. He was exposed to asbestos while working as a plumber at the Walker Naval Yard in Newcastle and as a pipefitter at the ICI chemical plant in Wilton, Teesside. He said he had no idea asbestos was dangerous and remembers colleagues at the shipyard playing football with it during their lunch break. Charles, who is married to Beryl and has four stepchildren, three children, and 15 grandchildren, was diagnosed with mesothelioma in June 2007 after going to his doctor complaining of flu-like symptoms. He said: “I had a suspicion that I had mesothelioma as I knew I had worked with asbestos. But it still came as a terrible shock when I was diagnosed. I get very short of breath and I notice this

particularly if I try to walk upstairs. I can't do any gardening or DIY and decorating like I used to do for not only myself but also for my children and stepchildren. This compensation is not going to bring my health back. It will make sure my wife will be looked after. It's a big relief for me to know that."

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release](#). [Northern Echo](#).

Amazon branded worker a druggie

Internet giant Amazon wrongly branded a worker a druggie and fired him, an employment tribunal has heard. Khalid Elkhader was awarded £3,453 in compensation after managers at the firm's west of Scotland facility told him he had tested positive for amphetamine and fired him. This case follows a report in Hazards magazine last month that accused the firm of using drug tests "as a punishment". In this latest case, the 33-year-old targeted by Amazon had never taken drugs and was shocked when a random test on 18 September last year was returned positive. He appealed and was asked to take a second test. Amazon claimed the test was also positive, and dismissed him in October 2006 for misconduct. It was only after he took Amazon to a tribunal that he learned the second test had actually been negative. He was awarded the compensation after the Glasgow tribunal ruled his sacking was unfair. Both samples held by the company were destroyed before he could arrange independent tests. However, a test by his own doctor was negative. Khalid, who had worked for Amazon for two years, said: "I'm happy now. I didn't care about the money, I just wanted to clear my name. Everyone who has been dismissed for this should fight for their rights because you can prove you are innocent. Amazon should give people a chance because there isn't a lot of work in this area. They need to change their drug testing procedures."

- [Greenock Telegraph](#). [Impaired thinking: The case for workplace drug and alcohol testing](#)

[has no substance](#), Hazards magazine, number 100, 2007.

HSE accused of inspection-by-phone

An inspection foreman has accused the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) of ignoring serious safety problems after it refused to visit a dangerous workplace and took "telephone action" instead. The source told trade paper Contract Journal that HSE ignored his plea for a personal visit after he raised serious concerns over health and safety standards at the structural steel firm where he had worked. He had resigned days earlier in protest at the safety problems. After he left, he called the HSE to list a string of safety violations he said his former employer had been unwilling to correct. They included no test certificates for overhead cranes, no chain certificates, no-one qualified to use the cranes and no pedestrian walkways identified. Mike McDonald, negotiator for Prospect, the union that represents HSE inspectors, told the paper: "There is a dire shortage of construction inspectors particularly in London and the South East. There has been some marginal increase in the past three years, but that hasn't really reversed the impact of reducing inspector numbers since 2000." An HSE spokesperson commented: "A decision on how a complaint is investigated is based on the circumstances and the information provided. To make best use of resources, in the first instance a complaints officer may make contact with those complained about by telephone to establish the grounds of the complaint," she said. However, figures obtained by Hazards magazine show the likelihood of a workplace inspection has dropped dramatically in recent years. HSE enforced workplaces in 2006/07 could expect an inspection once every 14.5 years, compared to once every seven years in 2001/02. Only 1 in 10 major injuries is now investigated by the resource-depleted watchdog. There was a 28 per cent increase in construction fatalities last year ([Risks 317](#)).

- [Contract Journal](#). [Just who does HSE protect?](#)

Hazards magazine, number 100, 2007.

Offshore safety on a 'knife-edge'

Safety is on a “knife-edge” in some parts of the North Sea oil industry, MPs have been warned. The admission from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) followed two platform fires and a damning report on offshore safety standards last month ([Risks 333](#)). HSE chief executive Geoffrey Podger told the House of Commons work and pensions committee on 28 November that some rigs were being operated far longer than the period they were initially designed for, without the necessary investment in upkeep and repairs. “There is this history of, on the one hand, disinvestment in the rigs and, on the other hand, prolongation beyond their natural life,” he said. “The situation is getting very knife-edge in some places. That is what the report shows and it is our responsibility as the HSE to enforce on that basis, and we are prepared to do so.” The HSE chief added: “The truth is that the whole sector is very challenged indeed on safety grounds and this is partly as a result of financial pressures, not least because the actual pressure to generate large quantities of oil when the prices are high may itself make it more difficult for people to actually do so safely.” This echoes concerns raised in recent years by offshore unions.

- [BBC News Online](#).

Boss jailed after death cover-up attempt

A company boss from north Wales has been jailed for manslaughter after the death of a worker in a workplace fall. Paul Christopher Alker, 33, required surgery for a broken collar bone after the 25ft fall through a skylight, just days after starting work with Wrexham Roof Services Ltd. He died shortly after his operation. In a prosecution brought by the Crown Prosecution Service, Steven Christopher Smith,

director of Wrexham Roof Services Ltd, pleaded guilty to manslaughter, a charge under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and a further charge of committing acts intending to pervert the course of justice. Mr Smith did not provide the right harnesses, but after Mr Alker plunged to his death, he went out and bought the safety equipment, put them on the roof, and blamed Mr Alker for not using it. He was jailed for a total of two and a half years following a hearing at Mold Crown Court. The Health and Safety Executive assisted North Wales Police on the investigation into the incident. HSE inspector Debbie John commented: “Mr Smith clearly knew that he should have provided safety harnesses for people working on roofs, but chose only to do this after the incident which led to the death of Mr Alker.” She added: “Figures show that in 2006/07, 45 people have died and more than 3,000 suffered a serious injury after a fall from height in the workplace. It remains the most common cause of fatal injury in the workplace, but the risk does not just apply to those working at great height. Many fatal and serious injuries are caused by people falling from below head height too.”

- [HSE news release](#) and [falls webpages](#). [Daily Post](#). [Wrexham Leader](#).

Safety warning after fall fine

Construction firms have warned that satisfactory edge protection must be in place to prevent falls from height following the prosecution of a Merseyside company after a site worker suffered serious injury. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) issued the advice as Copelare Ltd was fined £5,000 and ordered to pay costs of £6,783 at Bootle Magistrates' Court after it admitted safety breaches. Roofing sub-contractor Darren Lawler narrowly missed a spiked fence and a pile of bricks when he fell from a roof, landing on a trestle. He suffered serious head and facial injuries. A properly secured barrier around the edge of the roof could have prevented the fall, but there were gaps in the edge protection on this site, HSE said. HSE inspector Wayne

Crumpton commented: “Copelare, as principal contractor was responsible for the management of the site. Whilst Copelare did not fit the edge protection, it did appoint the sub-contractors but failed to ensure that they erected satisfactory edge protection that would have prevented Mr Lawler from falling.” He added: “Copelare should have ensured a permanent management presence on site for controlled access. They should have followed their own health and safety plan and reviewed all risk assessments and method statements in advance of work starting and agreed safe systems of work with individual contractors. The company should have inspected the edge protection before anyone was allowed on the roof and should have engaged a person who was competent to do so and required him or her to record their observations. Such inspections would have revealed the sub-standard edge protection and enabled remedial action to be taken before roof work commenced.”

- [HSE news release. BBC News Online.](#)

Firm fined after horror accident

A company has been fined £50,000 after an employee fell into a skip of broken glass and a 12-stone glass pane dropped on him. Ricky Waters, 38, suffered a depressed skull fracture and was in a coma for six days following the incident at the Vizor Tempered Glass works in Port Talbot. Swansea Crown Court heard that 38-year-old Mr Waters has been left with very poor vision in his right eye and has lost his sense of smell. He remains off work more than a year after the incident, which happened during a procedure to dispose of waste glass. Six years earlier there had been a similar incident on the Vizor site involving the same procedure. On that occasion two workers were injured, though less seriously. The court was told how waste glass was stored on an A-frame known as a stillage. A forklift truck was used to carry the stillage to an onsite skip. Mr Waters was standing on the stillage platform pushing glass into the skip when a gust of wind shifted a very large pane of

toughened glass. It pushed Mr Waters into the skip and the pane of glass weighing more than 12 stone landed on top of him. “The method of disposal of toughened glass was patently unsafe,” said Health and Safety Executive prosecutor Dale Collins. “It was an adopted practice for all on site and therefore all who adopted that procedure were at risk.” In 2001, the firm was prosecuted following the incident where two employees were lifted by a forklift truck while standing on a stillage. “They were prosecuted but didn't address the issue of disposal of toughened glass and put workers at continuing risk of serious injury,” said Mr Collins. “This was a reckless breach of the law rather than carelessness because the company knew what was happening and had been warned previously.”

- [HSE news release. Evening Post.](#)

Shiftwork linked to cancer

Shiftwork has been recognised officially as a “probable” cause of cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the cancer arm of the World Health Organisation, has said it will classify overnight shift work as a probable carcinogen after evidence was considered by a meeting of experts. Several studies have found that women working at night over many years are more prone to breast cancer. Some research also suggests that men working at night may have a higher rate of prostate cancer. “The problem is re-setting your body's clock,” said Aaron Blair, of the US National Cancer Institute, who chaired IARC's October meeting that considered the shiftwork evidence. “If you worked at night and stayed on it, that would be less disruptive than constantly changing shifts.” Unions said the findings reinforced the need for businesses to develop good guidelines around shiftwork. HSE's 2006 shiftwork guidance says 3.5 million in the UK work shifts, but makes no reference to a potential cancer risk ([Risks 268](#)). Shiftwork has been linked frequently to breast cancer ([Risks 222](#)), heightened accident risk ([Risks 178](#)), heart disease risk factors ([Risks](#)

266), pregnancy problems ([Risks 237](#)), and other forms of ill-health. IARC experts also ranked occupational exposure as a painter as carcinogenic to humans and as a firefighter as possibly carcinogenic to humans.

- IARC news release [[pdf](#)]. Kurt Staif and others. Carcinogenicity of shift-work, painting, and fire-fighting. [The Lancet Oncology](#), volume 8, number 12, pages 1065-1066, December 2007. Findings to be published by IARC next year, Shift-work, painting and fire-fighting, IARC monograph, volume 98. [Global union zero cancer campaign](#). [San Francisco Chronicle](#). [The Standard](#). [Radio New Zealand](#).
- Audio: [WNPR Connecticut Public Radio](#).

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

South Africa: Massive strike for mine safety

South Africa's mining sector was hit on 4 December by its biggest strike in two decades, as over half all the country's miners stayed home to protest at poor safety conditions. The one-day protest affected more than 60 companies mining gold, platinum and coal, according to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which represents about 270,000 workers. Marchers carried printed placards declaring "Safety is a human right" and "Organise or die". NUM secretary general Frans Baleni told demonstrators: "We are not here for a wage increase, but to raise the fact that we are dying underground." He demanded the prosecution of negligent mine bosses. The union's president, Senzeni Zokwana, said miners sold their labour and not their lives. "We demand safety in mines and we want to show the world that we are tired. Time has come for mine owners to change," he said. "In all incidents of mine deaths bosses appear shocked but without feeling the pain and without changing the way they mine." The general secretary of the Congress of South

African Trade Unions (Cosatu), Zwelinzima Vavi, said: "It can't be right that in an attempt to get food on the table we sacrifice our lives." The death rate in the nation's mines is significantly higher than in Australia or North America. About 200 miners die each year. Mining officials say that is because South African mines are among the world's deepest and most labour-intensive. But union officials also cite a lack of concern for safety dating from the apartheid era, a dearth of qualified inspectors and a failure to punish mine managers for safety infractions. South Africa's chief mine inspector, Thabo Gazi, told news outlets this week that mining companies were failing to meet a four-year-old pledge to improve safety. Union spokesperson Lesiba Seshoka said conditions must improve. He told a 40,000-strong gathering of protesters that marched through central Johannesburg: "If the big companies do not do anything to improve safety, we will be back on the streets again; we will stop the mines with a two- or three-month strike."

- [IRIN news](#). [NUM news release](#). [Sydney Morning Herald](#). [New York Times](#). [The Guardian](#). [Mail and Guardian](#).

Canada: Asbestos epidemic 'made in Canada'

A prominent Canadian politician has said the country deserves international derision for imposing a made-in-Canada asbestos disease epidemic on the rest of the world. In an opinion piece in the National Post, Pat Martin, an MP with the New Democratic Party, said the Canadian government had "recently reaffirmed its commitment to promoting and expanding the use of asbestos both at home and abroad" and a year ago "published new regulations that helpfully point out all the places where asbestos can be used in this country. The list includes textiles, construction materials, such as drywall compound and spray-on insulation, and incredibly, children's toys" ([Risks 297](#)). The MP added support for asbestos trade had included hosting promotional events in embassies and about Can\$30m (approx £15m) in federal

government grants. “The fact is no amount of government money will ever take the stink off the asbestos industry. I call it corporate welfare for corporate serial killers,” he said. He concluded: “So is Canada crazy? I prefer to think that the answer is yes, because the alternative is unthinkable. The alternative is that we as a nation are knowingly and willingly contaminating people around the world to protect the commercial interests of the asbestos cartel... If we are that gutless and spineless we deserve the scorn and derision of the international community, whose members can't understand why a nice country like Canada would impose this made-in-Canada epidemic on the rest of the world.”

- [National Post. NDP news release.](#)

Japan: Court rules man was worked to death

A court in central Japan has ordered the government to pay compensation to a woman who argued that her 30-year-old husband died from overwork at Toyota Motor Corp, Japan's largest car maker. Hiroko Uchino filed the suit after a local Labour Ministry office rejected applications for workers' compensation benefits she filed after the death of her husband, Kenichi, said Hiroko Tamaki, a lawyer for the plaintiff. The Labour Ministry office said the case did not qualify as death from overwork, according to the lawyer. This meant his family had been denied pension benefits. The three-judge panel, however, found that Kenichi Uchino died on 9 February 2002 after working about 106 hours of overtime in one month until the day before his death. The Nagoya District Court ordered the government to reverse the local office's decision and pay compensation. Death from overwork, known as “karoshi” in Japan, has steadily increased since the government first recognised it in 1987. As a middle manager in charge of quality control at a Toyota factory in Toyota City, Kenichi Uchino had been putting in long hours before he collapsed at work and died, the lawyer said. Toyota, which was not involved in this suit, said in a statement it would further

improve the management of its employees' health. In 1993, the widow of a Toyota Motor Corp employee who took his own life as a result of overwork was told by a High Court in Japan she was entitled to compensation. The judge said the 35-year-old's suicide was triggered by excessive hours and workload ([Risks 114](#)). Overwork-related suicide - karojisatsu – is also an officially recognised work-related condition in Japan.

- [Japan Times. San Francisco Chronicle. Yahoo.com. More on karoshi and karojisatsu.](#)

USA: Illness lays low 11 at pork plant

Eleven workers at a pork processing plant in Austin, Minnesota, fell ill between last December and July with a neurological disorder whose cause remains unknown, state health officials have said. The condition afflicting five of the workers at Quality Pork Processors Inc has been identified as a rare disease called chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy or CIDP, which normally strikes fewer than two people per 100,000. In this instance, it may have struck 11 out of about 100 people in a particular part of the plant, state officials said. It is most often a chronic disease that results in nerve damage and can lead to disability. With CIDP, something - perhaps a vaccine, a virus or a bacteria, or something else altogether - triggers the immune system to attack the protective sheath that surrounds nerves, said Dr Suraj Muley, an associate professor of neurology at the University of the Minnesota and an expert on the disease. In the case of the affected workers, “the question is whether the animal might harbour bacteria or a virus that triggered it,” Muley said. Dr P James B Dyck, an expert on the disease at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester who is familiar with some of the recent cases, said that an infectious agent is less likely than some other unknown factor among the workers or the plant. “Everyone worries about infection,” he said. “But more likely there is something there that is triggering an immune response,” he said. Dyck's father, also named P James Dyck, was the first to

identify the disease in 1975, and still practices at the Mayo Clinic. The state investigation began at the end of October after plant health officials reported to the Health Department an unusual pattern of symptoms that was restricted to a group of employees working in a single area of the hog butchering process. CIDP is a chronic disorder, meaning it is persistent and lasting. The most notable outbreak of CIDP's acute counterpart, Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), occurred in 1976, when 500 of the 40 million people who had been vaccinated against swine flu developed GBS. Twenty-five of those individuals died. GBS has been linked to exposure to organophosphate insecticides.

- [Minnesota Department of Health news release, webpage](#) and factsheet [pdf]. [Austin Daily Herald](#). [Star Tribune](#).

USA: Refinery blast risk is industry wide

A survey by the United Steelworkers (USW) union has found the conditions that led to the March 2005 explosion at BP's Texas City refinery are widespread throughout the refining sector and that the industry is failing to learn from explosions and near misses. The union's report, 'Beyond Texas City: The state of process safety in the unionised US oil refining industry', is based on the results of a 64-item survey sent to local unions at 71 USW-represented refineries nine months following the Texas City explosion. Findings were also based on a review of the literature on regulations, guidelines and lessons learned from previous refinery disasters. The 51 sites that responded represented 49 per cent of the US refining capacity and 22 refining companies, including majors and independents. Many of the refineries that had at least one of the four contributory conditions reported after the BP explosion either did not take action or took actions judged as less than very effective. A review of past refinery disasters also revealed similar hazardous conditions being repeated and not learned from. "These findings indicate that the potential exists in the refining sector for another Texas City style explosion," said USW

international president Leo W Gerard. "Apparently, that incident did not make enough of an impression on refiners because they continue to not heed the lessons learned from the explosions, fires and other incidents plaguing the industry." The union called for greater efforts to ensure effective union participation, widespread improvements in safety processes and management, and stricter safety standards backed up by "rigorous enforcement".

- [USW news release](#). [ICEM news report](#). [Beaumont Enterprise](#).
- [Beyond Texas City – full report \[pdf\]](#). [More on BP and Texas City](#).

EVENTS AND COURSES

TUC courses for safety reps

COURSES FOR SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 2007

- [Northern](#), [North West](#), [Southern & Eastern](#), [Yorkshire & Humber](#), [South West](#), [Midlands](#), [Scotland](#), [Wales](#)

USEFUL LINKS

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