

The **Redbridge Newsletter**

*Edited, designed and produced by retired members in
Redbridge to share with colleagues across London*

Summer 2022



Part of the 30-strong Redbridge NEU contingent on the 18 June TUC march and rally in London

INSIDE: Edmonton incinerator - Smartphone? No thanks! - Lies and wars - Four Minute Warning - Walthamstow walk - A superhead - Impact of pornography - Slowing cognitive decline - NEU Conference 2022 - Helping with casework - Chatting with (NEU Sec) Venda - Rwanda fiasco

Welcome

Welcome to the summer issue of the Redbridge Newsletter, featuring the usual eclectic mix of articles and news. Many of the articles have been written to inspire debate, and feedback is important to us. We want to include a regular 'letters and comments' section, so do email Mike Peters at mike321peters@gmail.com, one of the Editorial team.

It is very gratifying that colleagues from across the whole of London are increasingly becoming regular contributors.

Members in London have a long history of union involvement and activism, which continues unabated. Retired members are often the mainstay of District/Branch organisation, filling officer posts, helping with casework and supporting members in schools. Do let us know what is happening in your area.

An example of this involvement in Redbridge is the planning now being undertaken to use retired members' experience to support school reps and to fill in the gaps where there is currently no rep – a matter of some urgency in view of proposed balloting for action in the autumn.

We are looking for volunteers to join the scheme: please contact Bob Archer on email (bobarcher46@btinternet.com) or Liz Dolan via (edolan118@btinternet.com).

Our distribution network currently relies on email, which is not always up to date and may not reach more recent retirees. However, we are in the process of developing a website which should make access easier and enable us to expand our readership. We have decided, after much discussion, to retain the Redbridge brand for the time being, as this makes the origins of the newsletter clearly identifiable, but we are open to suggestions.

Without our hard-working editorial team, this Newsletter would not exist, so, for the record, here are their names:

Bob Archer

Liz Dolan

Mike Peters

Henry Tiller

New blood is also welcome

We hope you will enjoy the result.

What working teachers are up to ...



A group of NEU members at a local secondary school fashioned some hand-crafted placards to carry on the 18 June TUC march and rally in central London

A burning issue!

As a science teacher in the 1980s, I taught about the benefits of waste incineration, then believed to be an environmentally beneficial process, preventing the evils of landfill. I took many groups of pupils on tours of the Edmonton incinerator. In those days, before H&S legislation took over, we could see the whole seemingly magic process: from smelly dirty waste being tipped into the hot furnace, the turbines rotating and finally the dials moving as electricity produced from burning waste was magically fed into the National Grid. We were told that the waste was burned at a high enough temperature and that the filtration system was so efficient that any possible toxins were removed or rendered harmless.

Despite seeing big black clouds coming from the Incinerator chimney from time to time, we believed the experts that it was safe and 'a good thing'. Unfortunately, subsequent research studies have shown this is NOT the total truth. I was particularly shocked when I found out that infant mortality went up by a significant amount in North Chingford, a

relatively affluent area, when the current incinerator started operating. That was definitely not widely publicised.

Seven London boroughs form the North London Waste Authority (NLWA) including Enfield, where the incinerator is located just across the reservoirs from Chingford. Redbridge and other boroughs to the East send their waste to an incinerator in Essex but are still affected by the pollution from the Edmonton site. There are many concerns about the planned new Edmonton Incinerator; for example, it is much larger than the present one and its cost is ridiculously high. Should it be built at all given the health risks from air pollution involved and the dangers of climate change? Controversy about it was certainly a contributory factor to some of the anomalous results in the recent local council elections.

Council matters

The NLWA is run by a board of just 14 councillors, two from each of the boroughs involved. The Chair, Clyde Loakes, Deputy Leader of Waltham Forest



Campaigners have many concerns about the incinerator

Council, is very influential. He has chaired the Committee for 15 years and has invariably been re-elected unopposed. He holds a paid post within the company, London Energy, that will be running the proposed 'Eco-Park' in which the incinerator will be sited.

Many of the other representatives only serve for a year or two and tend to just agree with the status-quo, perhaps because they feel intimidated, or they don't know enough about the issues and haven't bothered to do their own research. Other local councillors, not on the committee, have no input to the decisions of the NLWA. It is a quango that appears to operate in a vacuum outside of the normal democratic process. Even Michael Gove has questioned aspects of its general and financial management.

In June 2020, I was one of 13 local people who made a deputation to the AGM of the NLWA. My deputation was entitled, 'Why I changed my mind about waste incineration and why you should too.' It was disturbing that not a single member of the board asked any one of us a single question about our presentations despite time being allowed for questions. They looked down and avoided eye contact as if they had been instructed not to engage with us. One new member representing Haringey said, after we were finished, that he had been very disturbed by some of the things he had heard but he was told by the Chair that there wasn't time to discuss this now and that he must wait until later when we had all gone, presumably so that we couldn't hear what was being said. Subsequently, the Leader of Haringey Council wrote to the Chair of the NLWA stating that Haringey Council now favours a pause in the process to allow for a full review of the project.

Planning and commissioning the new incinerator

Planning permission for the new, larger incinerator was granted in 2014, following a totally inadequate public consultation in which only a small random sample of residents were written to about the proposed upgrading of the waste management site, most of whom did not reply.

At the time, a majority of the public were blissfully unaware of the imminent dangers of global warming and the need to become carbon neutral, which has only become prominent in recent years. Many residents in the seven boroughs have still not even heard about the proposed plans and increasing public opinion against its construction over the last few years is being ignored and even sabotaged. Public money is being used to promote the project as 'green' in borough publications and websites to counteract arguments made by the protest

On 16th December 2021, the NLWA voted to commission Acciona, a Spanish construction company, to build the new incinerator with a much bigger capacity than the current one. This was the ONLY company that put in a bid for the project and the price has escalated enormously to £683 million. Acciona does not have a good reputation in the industry and has itself questioned why the new incinerator needs to be so big.

Protesters against the new incinerator believe that the signing of the contract was brought forward so that the substantial cancellation fee would act as a deterrent and serve to ensure the project would go ahead despite huge opposition to it growing over the last four years. The protest groups, which include Trade Councils, environmental groups and 'Black Lives Matter' have been asking for a 'Pause and Review' of the project in view of changing circumstances and increased scientific knowledge since the project was originally planned.

Environmental issues

When the current incinerator was built in 1969, we knew nothing about Greenhouse gases, Global Warming and Climate Change. What we did know was that coal and oil, were fossil fuels/ hydro-carbons - precious and finite resources, needed to produce the seemingly wonderful new materials, plastics and polyesters, that were changing our lives. Unfortunately, these 'wonder-materials' do not decompose and are now causing destructive consequences to the eco-systems on earth. Incinerating plastics creates the same greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, as burning the fossil fuels they are made from. We now know that we must drastically reduce our reliance on plastics and improve recycling techniques to minimise the quantity of residual waste.

Health issues

There are very serious health risks, particularly to children and vulnerable groups, including respiratory issues and cancers, due to the air pollution caused by burning metals and plastics, both of which form a large percentage of the waste that is burnt. A group of doctors from North Middlesex and other local hospitals are so worried about the health issues involved that they have formed their own protest group, Doctors Against the Incinerator. Regulations governing the gaseous emissions from incinerators are inadequate and out of date because they refer to the total mass of pollutants emitted. But the most dangerous particles to our health are the very smallest, of a similar size to some air molecules. These are too small to be filtered out and weigh virtually nothing.

I once viewed waste incineration as a necessary evil: after all, 'what else would we do with all the rubbish if



How the issue was reported in the local press

we didn't burn it?' Unfortunately, incineration is a deceptively convenient way of disposing of waste and discourages recycling. Once the furnace is alighted it must be continuously fed to keep it burning. More than sixty per cent of the waste put into black sacks is recyclable, yet it is not inspected before it is burnt. You can only burn things once! When the Earth's precious resources are burnt, they are changed forever. Modern methods of landfill can protect potential resources for the future.

We all know that the volume of household 'black-sack' waste has decreased considerably in recent years, and it needs to be reduced even further. There is far too much plastic packaging, for example. So, the need for a bigger incinerator is even less clear now than when the project was first proposed. It just doesn't make sense. The existing incinerator should be maintained for a specific time-period, such as ten years, during which time alternative arrangements to reduce waste and improve recycling could be put in place and its use phased out.

Many members of the NLWA, predominantly Labour Councillors, may well have been ignorant of the environmental and health implications when this project was first agreed and therefore cannot really be blamed for voting for it in 2014. However, over the last few years, even though much more information has

become available, the councillors have consistently refused to listen to reason and reconsider, despite official Labour Party policy, both locally and nationally, being against waste incineration.

Act now

All over the world plans to build new incinerators are being cancelled and existing ones are being phased out. Many have tried to bring the counter-arguments to the attention of the NLWA, using local democratic processes, and have been treated with derision and rudeness. The seeming lack of accountability of the NLWA and its intransigence on this topic are appalling. The issues under consideration are too important not to be challenged. This project, if it continues in its current form, will be seen by future generations as a big, expensive mistake. If we don't take climate change seriously and take drastic action soon, there may not be that many more future generations.

Betty Hales,
retired Redbridge NEU member and
Waltham Forest resident

Please let us know if you have any comments on the issues raised in this article by writing to mike321peters@gmail.com. Letters and short articles welcome.

Why I don't have and don't want a smartphone

Last March (2021) I went to renew my season ticket to watch Brighton and Hove Albion (The Seagulls) for the season just finished. I was told I would have to have it on my smartphone, which everybody has - don't they?

NO, they don't. I don't.

When I challenged the Club, they agreed I could continue using the smartcard I already had but they didn't promise this arrangement would continue and it would involve extra payment.

No compulsion

I do not have, nor do I want, a smartphone. I am challenging the assumption that everyone has or should have such a device to engage in such normal social activity as watching the football team, that I support, play. I may be a technophobe but I am not a luddite. I don't object to others having the latest piece of technology, but I don't see why I should be forced to use such technology or face the penalty of being excluded from social activities if I refuse to.

Of course, I recognise there are advantages in mobile communication and all that goes with this form of communications but mobile phones do have limitations - for example, in some areas, a signal may be absent. Anyone depending on Google maps in the mountains may be unwise.

Everyone's on their phone

I do not wish to join rows of people on the London underground, whose first act on entering a carriage is to take out their smartphone and start to do one or more of the following things: talk to someone not present; tap away on WhatsApp; watch a film on a tiny screen; play some digital game. I prefer to read an old-fashioned book.

Back in the seventies there were some people who refused to have televisions in their house. I was 14 before we had our first TV and I still prefer the wireless. I do not want communications 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There have been examples of workers being exploited by having 24-hour communication. Nobody, except perhaps the PM and a few others should be expected to be contactable every hour of every day.

Dangers of exclusion

I am quite happy to be described as bloody minded or out of touch but don't want to see marginalised people excluded from social activity because they don't



Bill is not alone! Paul Merton also does not have and does not want a smartphone

follow the latest trend. Society should be inclusive not exclusive, so those who don't want, or cannot afford, to have the latest smartphone should not face barriers to normal social life.

I was very pleased to find out that comedian Paul Merton does not have or want a smartphone. So, I am not alone!

Bill Harrison

Do you have something to say about mobile phones? Please send your comments to mike321peters@gmail.com



Lies, damned lies ... and wars

'There is no such thing as an honest war' - David Swanson

In the latest war to afflict humanity in Ukraine, when it comes to being economical with the truth, the Kremlin disinformation machine has excelled, turning lying into a kind of grim art form. Notwithstanding the provocative history of NATO's eastern expansion following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and some untruths from the Ukrainian/NATO side that will no doubt emerge in due course, the Russians currently rule the roost in the lying stakes.

Truth-bending techniques

The technique seems to be fairly straightforward: just deny everything and turn defence into attack. It's a strategy with which many of us retired teachers will be familiar from the classroom – there's that annoying kid misbehaving right in front of your very eyes who, when challenged, denies doing anything wrong at all and then proceeds to claim victimization by you. Thus, in Ukraine, the war is not a war but a 'special military operation', the Russian army are going into the country as liberators rather than invaders, the civilian victims of intensive shelling of schools, apartment blocks and hospitals are just 'crisis actors', civilians are not targeted at all, a large bomb killing hundreds of would-be passengers at a railway station is not of Russian origin and the decimation of towns and villages has been self-inflicted.

A History of lying

However, although prolific and outrageous, this kind of lying is certainly nothing new. Aeschylus (456BC-524BC) the father of Greek tragedy, back in the murky depths of time, is generally accredited with that most-quoted of quotes, 'In war, truth is the first casualty', which seems to hit the proverbial nail pretty much on the head. From the hundreds of cases available over a long period of time, here are just four famous examples of war-time truth-bending, cited in *War is a Lie* by David Swanson and various internet sources:

World War 1

In April 1917, the British press published what it claimed were reports from newspapers in Belgium and the Netherlands of a German atrocity: a human corpse reprocessing programme. According to the stories, industrial plants were springing up throughout enemy territory in which dead bodies collected from No Man's Land were being harvested for fat. These 'corpse-processing factories' were accused of extracting human

fat for use in the manufacturing of candles, soap, industrial lubricants and munitions. This programme was supposedly the result of the British naval blockade, which was starving Germany of raw materials. The reports were refuted when it was pointed out that animal carcasses were being used rather than human bodies. That didn't stop the story from being widely circulated, with opposition MPs in Parliament pressing the government to release everything it knew about Germany's supposed harvesting of the dead.

World War 2

In 1939, when Germany was preparing to invade Poland, a group of Himmler's SS men, dressed in Polish uniforms, barged into a German radio station in a border town and announced their anti-German intentions in Polish, while firing guns. They brought along a German who sympathised with the Poles, killed him and left him behind to look as if he'd been shot while taking part in their attack. Hitler then announced that force would have to be met with force and proceeded to attack Poland. This is a good example of the use of dishonest pretence in the manufacture of a so-called defensive war.

The Vietnam War

In 1964, US war ships were allegedly attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin by the North Vietnamese. These 'unprovoked attacks' were used to escalate the Vietnam war, although the same ship that was supposed to have been attacked on 4th August had damaged three North Vietnamese boats and killed four North Vietnamese sailors only two days earlier. With the war subsequently authorised by Congress, President Johnson later admitted, "for all I know our navy was just shooting at whales out there." And in 2003, Robert Mc Namara, who had been Secretary of Defence at the time, admitted that the alleged attack did not actually happen.

This was even though, just days after the Tonkin Gulf non-incident, McNamara had claimed, with absolute certainty before the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees, that the North Vietnamese had indeed attacked US war ships.

The Gulf War

In 1990, a 15-year-old Kuwaiti girl told a US congressional committee that she'd seen Iraqi soldiers take 15 babies out of an incubator in a Kuwaiti hospital and leave them on a cold floor to die. Some Congress



Alleged North Vietnamese attacks on US warships in the Gulf of Tonkin made headlines in 1964, and led to the US Congress authorising all-out war. In 2003, Robert McNamara admitted that these attacks did not actually happen

members knew, but did not let on to the US public, that the girl was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the USA, that she'd been coached by a major US public relations company, paid by the Kuwaiti government, and that there was no other evidence for the story. President Bush used the story of the dead babies 10 times in the next 40 days in seeking approval for the war. And, of course, we're all very much aware of the big fibs used to justify the second Iraqi War of 2003, involving dodgy dossiers and weapons of mass destruction.

So, how should we react to what we're told before, during and after any war? Well, the Latin phrase, 'de omnibus dubitandum' (everything must be doubted) attributed to the French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), would seem to provide a universally appropriate framework for making any judgements and arriving at any conclusions.

Henry Tiller

**Readers are invited to contribute their own examples of wartime lies etc. Please send to –
mike321peters@gmail.com**



This "Punch" cartoon from 1917, which shows the German Kaiser telling a young recruit that he will come in handy dead or alive, repeats the British smear about rendering fat from human remains.



Clayton Powell assured the UN that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction - which nobody could ever locate

The Four Minute Warning

Of what significance is this to anyone under the age of 30? For many, there may have been some reference to the Warning in a school Humanities course but even for those of us who grew up with it ringing in our ears, it is now a distant memory.

The post-war nuclear scene

Growing up after the second world war, there was the 'Bomb'. We knew of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Britain, never subjected to school drills, customary in parts of the US, we got useless government leaflets, which occasionally came through our doors, entitled 'Protect and Survive'. We were aware of nuclear weapons being tested on Christmas Island or idyllic atolls like Bikini - places which we later found had become uninhabitable. A plane carrying nuclear weapons fell into the Mediterranean close to the Spanish coast - what happened next was a mystery.

It was during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that we came closest to feeling a nuclear war would be unleashed. At university in Bristol, one Saturday afternoon, I joined a demonstration calling for no to war, which wound through the city centre. We were met by cries of 'Get back to Russia', and I was arrested for sitting down in the road. I was terrified that this was it and I wanted to go back home to my family in Manchester.

Nuclear weapons today

And then suddenly this February, with the unleashing of the war against Ukraine, Putin has talked of being prepared to use 'tactical nuclear weapons'. For many of us, the nonsensical word in that sentence is the adjective 'tactical'. They are nuclear weapons, any use of which instantly raises the catastrophic danger of a nuclear war. For the first time for a very long time, I have been made to think seriously again about what this all means.

In the 60s, I had gone on Aldermaston marches, had been a supporter of CND and nuclear disarmament, joining demonstrations at US airbases at Greenham and Lakenheath, putting resolutions at NUT meetings, supporting Lindis Percy at the Fylingdales ballistic missile early warning service in Yorkshire. But then all that activity had been background rather than central to my thinking.

Now, with the news of increasing defence expenditures across Europe and governments' determination to send arms to Ukraine indiscriminately, we are faced with a real existential danger that affects us all. Having



Women's anti-nuclear protest at Greenham Common. Photo: Ceridwen

been persuaded somehow that the West operates under the policies of 'No First Use', we ignore the 'Bomb' at our peril.

'No First Use' - the real story

Five years ago, Daniel Ellsberg published *Doomsday Machine: the confessions of a nuclear war planner* (Bloomsbury), which presents an alternative reading of nuclear policies. Ellsberg was a military planner, working for the Rand Corp in the Pentagon in the early 60s, who in the middle of the Vietnam War unleashed the Pentagon Papers which, like Wikileaks today, revealed the true nature of US operations. What we did not know at the time was that he had also been a high-level planner of US nuclear war strategy, involved in copying top secret strategy documents, which he intended to publish later. For various reasons 'later' became 40 years plus.

In *Doomsday Machine* he reveals that all planning about nuclear war today is rooted in the initial strategic thinking laid down by Eisenhower in the early '50s, and it has never really altered. The aim would be to win any nuclear war and this would entail necessary first use if it would stop any attack. Consequently, US nuclear

weapons are targeted on all cities of any size in either Russia or China. Since then, there has been an increasing number of nuclear states, increasing numbers and size of weapons and the concomitant increasing dangers of mistakes or accidents.

Time to learn and become active

Initially the danger of nuclear war was framed by radiation and blast damage but today we know that a nuclear winter would be the real outcome - a cloud of dust particles circling the upper atmosphere for long periods of time ensuring the destruction of the ecology of the planet and of human life as we know it.

If you watch the discussion between Ellsberg and Noam Chomsky, hosted by Intercept on YouTube in April 2018 (discussion of the book starts 15 mins in) these two men, both over 90, give a rare example of great courage and determination to speak at a time when to express counterviews to those in power is almost impossible. Why in any public discussion of a seemingly worthy US position - refusing NATO direct involvement in the war in Ukraine - is there no discussion of the massive injections of cash into the coffers of the arms manufacturers? The US 'aid to Ukraine'

initiative announced last month consisted of \$8bn in aid and \$20bn to the US arms manufacturers to provide the promised weapons.

But is there any discussion of what is the real defence policy, which has nuclear weapons as the central pivot? Do we ever hear of the nuclear precipice? What guarantees do we have, all living under the shadow of total annihilation, that everything, or even anything, is being done to de-escalate military / nuclear confrontation?

Read the book. Watch the video discussion. Then act. Speak about it. Ensure that we support reinvigorated anti-nuclear campaigns. Support action against the upgrading of Lakenheath, currently being undertaken to accommodate new US nuclear missiles - missiles which would replace those we successfully got removed from Greenham.

Bertrand Russell once asked - *Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?*

Jane Shallice

**If you agree or disagree with any of the points made in this article, please send your comments to –
mike321peters@gmail.com**



The Ballistic Missile Early Warning Station at Fylingdales, Yorkshire, part of an international chain.
Photo: Cherubino (Diskussion)

Walking through radical Walthamstow

Around 15 retired teachers and friends had a completely absorbing three hours in Walthamstow on 25th April for a walk 'In the footsteps of William Morris' with guide, Roger Huddle. He had been active in his youth in the Rock-against-Racism campaign and the Anti-Nazi League and has been an activist throughout his life.

Roger's encyclopaedic knowledge of the working-class history of the area made the walk both enjoyable and informative. Having been born and brought up in the area, Roger was able to add his own personal anecdotes to well-researched historical knowledge.

Growth of Walthamstow

On a rather grey cool day our walk started by the station, which was, as in so many villages around London, the catalyst for the growth of the London suburbs in the nineteenth century. Labour demands for the building of housing and the digging of reservoirs in the Lea Valley attracted working men and women and the concomitant development of labour organisations.

Community buildings

The Walk covered several miles and included the site of a women's suffrage march, the old workhouse and town hall, a fine building from the later part of the

nineteenth century, which was the old Co-operative store, and we finished at the William Morris Hall. This Hall, a stone's throw from the Walthamstow street-market, was a community centre funded by workers, who bought bricks and organised sponsored bike rides and social events. It was built by volunteer craftsmen on their Sunday mornings and was opened in 1903 by Walter Crane.

Gentrification

As in many parts of London and other cities, Walthamstow has suffered from gentrification and many of the buildings, which were once public, are now in private hands as 'fine residences' (you can add your own estate agents' blurb!). Walthamstow 'village' is a dramatic example of this.

Unfortunately, our meandering pace meant that we didn't get as far as the William Morris Gallery, and since it is closed on Mondays, we will need to visit individually.

We want to thank Redbridge retired educators for organising the Walk and Roger for his excellent commentary.

Monica Brady
Jane Shallice



Born and brought up in the area, Roger was able to add personal anecdotes about the places visited

Talking to a 'super-head'

An ocean cruise has many facets, which the numerous television programmes about cruising fail to explore meaningfully. One of the most interesting of these is the first-hand knowledge and information one can pick up from one's fellow passengers.

The holiday mood, absence from home and work and the pressures and obligations these bring, the probable fleetingness of the on-board friendships, make people less guarded and more relaxed.

Meeting a very successful 'super-head'

On one cruise, my wife and I gradually became acquainted with a disgruntled, recently retired 'super head'. Unlike some head teachers we have met, he lacked a sense of self-importance. A very successful headteacher, he had been persuaded to take over a 'failing school'. At the same time, he had decided to become an Ofsted inspector. He was so well regarded in the north of England, he had been invited to meet with an education minister and senior officials in London. These three experiences contributed to his decision to quit the profession he loved.

The failing school

He explained that it was almost impossible to turn around a 'failing school'. Once Ofsted had delivered its damning report, savvy potential parents in the catchment area moved to ensure their children did not attend that secondary school. Existing staff, faced with the prospect of implementing the onerous improvement plan, with endless meetings, working groups, insets, and bureaucracy, hastened to leave for other schools, or increasingly, other jobs.

Recruitment of new, able staff, without incentivized pay, and departmental investment, proved highly problematical. Closing the school and starting afresh had not been an option. The local authority naively assumed the appointment of a respected, successful leader of a well subscribed school would be a game-changer. Moreover, he still had to run his own successful school.

Meeting the minister

The meeting in London with a Minister from the Department of Education did not go well. Our friend, and his local authority colleague, considered the minister arrogant, inflexible and naïve about the reality of actual schools.

Depressed, the head-teacher was escorted at the end of the meeting to the exit by one of the senior advisers present at the meeting, who remarked, "Clearly, we've a lot to learn".



Ron Oldham

His experience as a member of Ofsted was, perhaps, the most significant factor in his decision to quit his two headships. As one of the team inspecting a secondary school, he was telephoned by the lead inspector at 7.00am. "Get yourself down to the perimeter fence of the school early. See if you can catch any students smoking or up to no good. It could be one of the things to help nail this school management". He decided to ignore this instruction. He found the culture of this Ofsted team and its leader repugnant. He refused to endorse the resulting Ofsted report, and made his views clear, both verbally and in writing.

Decision to resign

By now, feeling the odds increasingly stacked against him, and knowing he was passing his stress on to his teaching colleagues, which was having an adverse effect on their well-being and inevitably, the well-being and educational progress of the schools' students, reluctantly, he made the decision to resign his headships. An intelligent, cultured (my wife and I had got to know him and his wife whilst attending on-board classical concerts), highly experienced, pragmatic, empathetic and successful head teacher was lost to the profession.

However, he continues to be involved in education, and is called upon by schools in his area for advice and as an occasional substitute head teacher.

Ron Oldham

Pornography and young people

Classroom teachers and support staff know that pornography is having a harmful impact on the children we teach.

Although we can acknowledge that amongst adults there may be different views on pornography, as educators it is essential that we recognise the fact we are delivering the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum to children under the age of 18 and must have space in the classroom to problematise the sexist, heteronormative, racist and ableist tropes that pornography is laced with.

Recent research

A recent study found that 44% of boys said that pornography had given them ideas about the types of sex they wanted to try and, when paired with the results of another study, which found that one in eight titles on the home pages of the UK's most popular pornography websites described sexual violence against women and girls, we can't ignore that some of the ideas, for the types of sex children want to try after watching porn, may be violent. What's more, research carried out by We Can't Consent to This reported that 38% of women under forty have experienced unwanted slapping, spitting, strangulation or gagging during sex. Young people themselves also told researchers that they perceived repeated viewing of online pornography as having a desensitising effect – porn is damaging children's sexual development.

The role of educators

The ramifications of the MeToo movement have been felt in schools across the country, with many young people speaking out about sexual harassment and gendered violence. Of course, we do not want to shut down open dialogue about preferences and choice in relation to sexual behaviour, but we must properly equip young people with the tools to identify non-consensual sexual acts and report them, and to be able to choose what they really want from their sexual relationships.

Impact of pornography

Pornography is not designed to educate young people about sex, or teach young people how to build trust and respect with a sexual partner. In fact, pornography is so readily available that several newspapers reported that children are consuming porn on their phones in the same way as they watch TV. This normalisation of a sexist-raunch culture, that encourages the objectification of women and girls, plays into an envi-



Amy Fletcher

ronment that puts pressure on children to take and share pornographic images themselves, and for many children to be sent these images without their consent (something we are seeing in schools across the country).

Social issues

Pornography doesn't just normalise sexist tropes, but also often presents a damaging heteronormative and binary view of sexual behaviour, as well as centring on only certain types of bodies. Harmful racialised tropes are also prevalent in pornography. These are societal issues which damage boys as well as girls.

The NEU approach

In the NEU we know that RSE must be adapted to suit the needs of all of our pupils, which is why we urgently need properly resourced RSE that is delivered by well-trained staff, who are well-equipped to facilitate pupil voice, debate and critical thinking around pornography. It is vitally important that school staff acknowledge that young people will feel curious about sex, and may look to pornography if they do not get excellent, honest RSE in school. We must teach children to be critical of any pornography they may come across, but also point them to better sources of information through an excellent RSE curriculum.

As a union that is 70% female, we must stand against the way pornography reinforces sexism, misogyny and other damaging tropes, so that we can equip this generation to live healthy and happy lives in school and beyond.

Amy Fletcher

If you would like to discuss further any of the points made in this article, please send your comments to –
mike321peters@gmail.com

Philip Hawker explores the latest research

It's OK – you can carry on using your brain and stay alive

Yesterday, I took a break from my studies and decided to unpack an exciting new standard lamp with directional lights for my lounge that I had recently bought at B&Q in Leyton Mills. (I don't get out much, and my excitability threshold has always been very low!) I found I needed a small alum key that would make the assembly task a lot easier. However, in the time it had taken me to walk from the lounge to the kitchen to collect my tool from the toolbox, I realised, with a mixture of embarrassment and annoyance that I had forgotten what I had journeyed from one room to an adjacent one to fetch! I imagine that there are many of us who have had an experience very much like this! This started me thinking, 'Is this how it starts?'

Slowing cognitive decline

I am of course referring to forgetfulness or the onset of mild 'cognitive decline', which might, but need not be, the precursor of dementia. I have been interested in this subject for some time now, and I wrote a brief piece on the topic for the Autumn 2020 Newsletter. I argued for the pursuit of a structured course of study after retirement as a strategy for an intrinsically rewarding way of arresting a process that seems to afflict many of us as soon as the last echoes of the staff-leaving party are a distant echo. There are other strategies that yield similar beneficial results and these are touched on by Carl Wright, a gerontologist, in his TEDx video, which does contextualise the issue very well: cognitive decline is triggered by increasing disengagement with the world (socially and intellectually) and this 'retirement trap' actually begins before the leaving-do! <https://ideas.ted.com/think-retirement-is-smooth-sailing-a-look-at-its-potential-effects-on-the-brain/>. Factors which may protect cognitive reserve are illustrated in my power-point infographic at the end of the piece.

An alternative hypothesis

I am so convinced that the main thrust of my piece is correct, that I am now preparing the dissertation proposal for my next degree. However, my smug complacency (I blame it on my genes) took something of a knock when I recently read a paper that suggested a scary downside to all this cerebral activity I was looking forward to. While the original paper, "*Regulation of Lifespan by Neural Regulation of REST*" was

published in *Nature*, a freely available online copy can be found at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6893853>. In short, the research suggests that the protein (REST) is positively correlated with longevity in mice and roundworms while its reduced expression is positively correlated statistically with an attenuated lifespan. Why is this? The mechanism is simply explained in a 'Big Think' article thus: "*Specifically, REST suppressed the expression of genes that control for a variety of neural features related to excitation, like neurotransmitter receptors and the structure of synapses.*" (<https://bigthink.com/health/neural-activity-lifespan/>).

At first blush, the conclusion looks counter-intuitive: if you want to live longer, don't think too much! The logic of the argument appears faultless: if increased cognitive activity causes a reduction in the brain's production of the REST protein and if low levels of REST cause a reduction in lifespan, then it would seem to follow as night follows day that those desirous of an optimised lifespan would be well-advised to avoid any activity that increases neural activity...and that includes study!

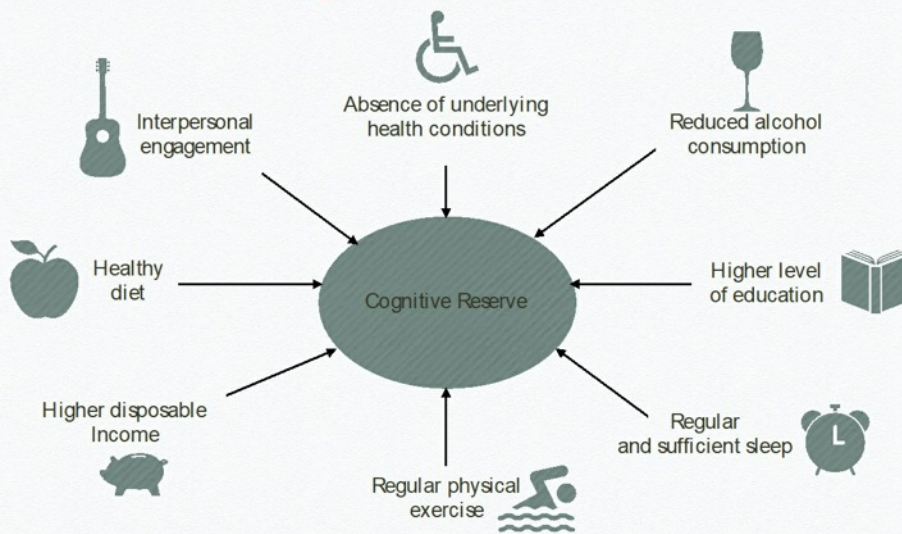
Keep on using your brain

There are two reasons why any blushes are quite unnecessary. Firstly, as I said above, the authors don't claim to have established a causal quantifiable relation between higher mental activity in humans, only a correlation between higher levels of neural activity in mice and some diminution in expected overall lifespan. Secondly, I urged colleagues to continue with post-retirement study because research suggests it is one factor that has been shown to delay dementia, NOT because of any relation to lifespan. A minor suppressed premise is lurking here: 'You ought to refrain from doing anything at all that risks compromising your natural life span. I would feel guiltier recommending a life without ANY risk at all. It wouldn't be longer necessarily, it would just seem like it!'

Concerns

The implication of the new research did, however, leave me very unsettled: my piece might (inadvertently) be curtailing the natural lifespan of my teaching col-

Factors correlated with high cognitive reserve



Source: "Predictors of Incident Mild Cognitive Impairment and Its Course in a Diverse Community-Based Population" *Neurology*, January, 04, 2022; 98,(1), M.J. Angevaere and J. Vonk et al

(right) Factors known to be determinants of cognitive decline. Obviously, not all factors are weighted equally for all people, and you will have a good idea how well your lifestyle in retirement aligns with them. So, eat well, drink moderately and enjoy your retirement merrily!

leagues, who heeded my 2020 piece! This has left me understandably anxious to understand just how big a threat this posed. The good news is that the research doesn't mean that you can expect to be contactable only via Ouija board by loved ones as a response to throwing yourself into study as I urged. The lead author, Professor Bruce Yankner, does not intend to imply that there is a direct and quantifiable causal connection between higher intellectual activity in humans and reduction in natural lifespan but that, "*An exciting future area of research will be to determine how these findings relate to such higher-order human brain functions.*" (<https://bigthink.com/health/neural-activity-lifespan/>). The authors conclude that understanding the effect of this protein on gene expression holds out the possibility that its successful regulation can lead to interventions that can ameliorate its impact on lifespans otherwise limited by its presence.

Reasons to be cheerful

Other research on factors associated with age-related mild cognitive decline offers further grounds for optimism, eg the disruptive effect of the degeneration of the myeline sheaths insulating the axons of brain cells is now better understood (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/14501200/>) as is the role of astrocytes and microglia in removing harmful amyloid plaques and MAPT, or tau protein aggregates, which impedes communication between brain cells in Alzheimer's patients (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fncel.2021.645233/full>). A helpful analogy suggested to me might be to think of the amyloid plaque acting like the

calcium deposits around the elements of an aging kettle preventing it from efficiently boiling the water!

There are, you will be delighted to know, even more reasons to be cheerful. Firstly, what is euphemistically called 'senior moments' might cause us more concern than 'youthful' ones because, in retirement these moments are made more salient as we have more time to reflect on their occurrence than in an earlier and busier stage of life. It is argued that no life stage has a monopoly on forgetfulness: it might be just a difference in degree rather than a difference in type of behaviour. Secondly, there is not an age at which we stop producing new brain cells; it is now understood that neurogenesis really is a thing. This is particularly true of a region of the brain called the hippocampus which is central to memory (see the TED talk by an eminent researcher in **Philip Hawker explores the latest research** this field at https://www.ted.com/talks/sandrine_thuret_you_can_grow_new_brain_cells_here_s_how

Thirdly, there are several life-style factors which we can change and which are known to be 'up stream' causal factors in preventing cognitive decline or, as researchers prefer to call it, building cognitive reserve, and over these factors we retain a great deal of control. Activities which 'stretch your mind' are benefiting your brain because this stimulates 'neural plasticity' and I hope to have more to say on this another time.

Any reactions to this article? Please send them to – mike321peters@gmail.com. Letters or short articles are both welcome.

Reflections on the NEU Conference, 2022

Having joined the NUT in 1969, I finally attended Conference this year, only as an observer since I had been informed that I could not, as a retired teacher, be a delegate. However, I have to admit, I did feel more secure, sitting in splendid isolation in the observers' balcony than I would perhaps have done in the main hall.

Here are a few of my reflections:

- I was pleasantly surprised to see and, especially, hear from so many first-time delegates who spoke with such passion and knowledge on key topics.
- We were told several times that the Union is 70+% female, although it should be said that in many areas this is not reflected at leadership level. What really impressed me in Bournemouth was the number of young female speakers. Taking several extremely diverse topics, SEND, the issue of lack of library provision in schools and the debate about pornography, as examples, their contributions have given me hope for the future of the NEU.
- The contributions from non-teachers. Yes, we're now the NEU and numbers are growing largely due to the recruitment of members in non-teaching roles, but I have not seen this yet at district level: all the Redbridge delegates were teachers. To hear from colleagues who are librarians, science technicians, teaching assistants etc provided a much-needed alternative perspective, especially regarding pay and conditions of service – a perspective we should be listening to as a matter of urgency.
- Attending fringe events stretched my levels of stamina and, in one case, patience, but I went to Bournemouth to learn more and to meet people with diverse views and backgrounds. In this context it was a privilege to talk to teachers from Sudan, who are opposing an oppressive regime there.
- The fact that membership of the NEU is composed of a broad spectrum of political views has, in my opinion, often been overlooked at district level. At Conference, I saw what this means in practice. As the Union comprises more than 450,000 members, delegates must reflect a range of membership views. For the most part, proceedings were civil, and all opinions respected, as the reports from various Executive

members have stressed. However, regarding two issues, splits did occur.

Protest

One issue was the reaction to Bridget Phillipson, Shadow Secretary of State, who made extremely ill-advised comments regarding maintaining Ofsted – despite the previous day's passionate debate unanimously condemning it. Although, the Educate article on Conference refers to 'a mixed reception' to her speech, in reality there was a good deal of shouting, to the extent that the Chair, Daniel Kabede, suggested protesters went for an early lunch. But the shouting continued from outside the Hall, presumably to drown out Ms Phillipson's speech. What those protesters wouldn't have seen was the standing ovation given to her at the end of her speech. Was this a reaction against the demonstrators rather than support for Ms Phillipson's views? Personally, I found the barracking unnecessary and offensive. I'm sure that could be put down to my age. I would say it's my principles! However, the incident certainly highlights differences of opinion.

Ukraine

The second issue concerned the amendments to the emergency motion on Ukraine, an issue that had caused a great deal of controversy, with posts, some quite inflammatory, on the unofficial NEU website and comments from (a delighted?) right-wing press. Neither the emergency motion itself, nor the amendments, which reflected vastly different political standpoints regarding the invasion of Ukraine, was passed. That surprised me bearing in mind the status of the speakers putting the motion. Perhaps more moderate voices were, in fact, present.

What particularly interested me was how the voting system worked and how different delegations were organised. Did delegates vote as a block (or bloc), following orders or did they listen to the speeches and then decide?

Maureen McCarthy

Comments welcome from other Conference attendees who might not have viewed events in the same way! Please send to mike321peters@gmail.com

Doing casework

the perspective of a retired teacher

When I agreed to take on a 'couple of cases' for Redbridge NEU, I hadn't foreseen the differences I would face compared to the ten years plus spent as an NUT rep in a large secondary school. Here are just a few reflections on these differences:

- One difference between then and now, is being called in to fight fires that have often spiralled out of control. Incidents that would have been dealt with in the early stages in the schools in which I was a rep, because colleagues would come and chat and we could discuss options, had escalated since there wasn't a rep. So, I've been called in to address disciplinary cases or cases due to the action of totally understandable decisions made by stressed-out, emotional colleagues – cases which are often doomed to fail. The number of colleagues who have previously had exemplary attendance records but have taken long-term sick leave due to the stress of facing hostile SLTs is truly disturbing. This issue really highlights the need for reps in every school, so that initial action / a triage system can be put in place.

- Another difference is the amount of extra material to read through since I am now faced with a complete range of schools: primary/secondary; academies / LEA schools/ independent schools, many with their own policies and procedures. This proliferation of schools reflects the privatisation of the education system and its lack of accountability. How can educators achieve a fair hearing, especially in grievance or disciplinary cases, with everything kept in-house? However well-prepared a caseworker or rep is, if the institution doesn't follow its own policies, what redress is there? The ultimate recourse is a tribunal, but how many such cases have been supported by the NEU Executive?

- I have become aware of the vast difference between the primary and secondary sectors, which is something I had never realised before. This is seen not only in the lack of finance for TLRs etc. in primary schools but also the expectation that teachers will do the additional work anyway. Financial constraints can lead to the unfair wielding of power by SLTs, including allegations of favouritism and nepotism. Of course, such things are present in the secondary sector but they seem far more prevalent in smaller schools where emotional blackmail and, especially, the personalisation

of issues, dominate. Hopefully, the fact that more primary school colleagues, both teaching and non-teaching, joined the NEU during the lockdowns, will lead to more voices being heard. The primary sector **must** be a priority for the Union. Bullying in this sector is rife and members all too often move on rather than face the stress of confronting their headteachers.

The next points relate specifically to the cases I have been allocated, which have largely fallen into two spheres. They obviously comprise a small and probably skewed sample of Redbridge cases, but the data has concerned me so much that I have expressed concerns to the District Secretaries. These are issues that, in my opinion, must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Issues of ethnicity

First, the number of minority ethnic, principally black, colleagues who are facing disciplinary hearings, blocked pay progression, 'support plans', redundancy, microaggression, or who leave their jobs to avoid being formally labelled in the meetings to which they have been summoned.

I saw this in the 1970s and 80s, but to experience it in Redbridge 2019-2022 is truly shocking. My statistics: 81% of my cases have been members from minority ethnic groups. I raised these issues with one chair of governors, citing the appalling lack of diversity in her school's SLT; thus, even though 23 out of 45 TLR and other members of middle management were from minority ethnic groups, all 8 members of SLT were white, including two promoted in the previous six months. Other statistics from this school showed the disproportionate numbers of black teachers on support plans, while several had either been shepherded out 'voluntarily' or dismissed.

The NEU should be addressing the issue in the round, so we are not reduced to providing snapshots which can lead to conclusions that can be shot down since the sample size is too small – as I fully acknowledge is the case with the statements I am making here. Data is needed, regarding the total workforce in schools, the make-up of SLTs and governing bodies, the composition of middle-management post-holders and of non-teaching leadership posts. We need a collective approach, and this must come from the Executive and district officials.

Issues of gender

Secondly, there is the deliberate policy by a number of SLT's to 'remove' women in their early 50s onwards - ie the most experienced, and expensive, members of staff. This is not an isolated phenomenon. Is it recommended in the Handbook for new Headteachers, especially those in primary schools? Women with unblemished 35 year+ teaching records are facing disciplinary hearings, often due to issues that they cannot comprehend.

Since they assume they will be treated fairly, with their years of service acknowledged, they either break down and leave on medical grounds or take payments with NDAs, or both. It's obviously not just a phenomenon regarding teachers.

The policy seems to be to start with non-teaching staff, TAs, LSAs and lunchtime supervisors, many of whom are within this age-group. Their numbers are even more difficult to quantify because they may not

have joined unions. This really is something that should be addressed, particularly because recent action in Newham schools has shown that battles can be won with collective action.

At the last pre-Covid London Retired Teachers' Conference, Waspi women spoke about how they were struggling since they were not eligible for pensions. How many educators are in a similar position due to deliberate policies by headteachers? Are we keeping statistics? Perhaps people don't think it's necessary; that the problem will eventually solve itself because educators in this category will soon become extinct.

Lots of thoughts here with which readers may or may not agree, but are these issues that the union should be addressing? Comments welcome.

Maureen McCarthy

**If you would like to respond to this article, please
send letters or other contributions to –
mike321peters@gmail.com**

Chatting with Venda

An effective Union is built on the involvement and commitment of its grass-root members in schools. That's something we in Redbridge value very highly and our officers work hard to nurture all our members. I spoke recently with NEU District Secretary, Venda Premkumar, about what that has meant over the last two years and how it will shape future priorities.

Casework

Venda identified an overwhelming escalation of casework arising from the realities of keeping an education service going during the pandemic, on top of pre-existing problems with workload and conditions of service. Covid-19 has put tremendous stress on an already overburdened workforce, throwing up the additional hurdles of online teaching and constantly changing advice from government, local authorities and academy chains, which has not always been helpfully interpreted by headteachers.

There has been an increase in workplace bullying, over-zealous application of sickness policies and intimidation of staff needing to shield or care for a sick or vulnerable family member. The general atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion has given rise to greater concerns about the mental-health of staff as well as of children. To address this issue in the immediate crisis, Venda has enlisted the support of a nucleus of retired teachers, who give willingly of their time and experience to undertake casework relating to individual



Venda Premkumar is the Secretary of Redbridge District NEU

members. (see elsewhere in this issue) In the longer term, it is hoped that this will continue and will free Venda and her fellow officers to focus on collective school issues.

School reps

School reps are at the heart of developing an effective Union: they are the first point of call for members'



Redbridge NEU school reps at a training session, June 2022

concerns, provide a vital link with headteachers and senior management teams and enable crucial connection with Branch officers. A strong network of school reps is essential for ensuring that members are properly informed and supported.

Redbridge has worked tirelessly to increase the number of reps but there are still too many schools where no-one is prepared to take on the role. To combat this, training sessions will continue to be provided for new reps. Retired members are stepping up to act as stop-gaps in schools without reps, and planning is ongoing to produce a workable programme of backup support for less experienced reps.

School culture

Venda's mission is to challenge punitive practices and the culture of fear. No-one should have to keep looking over their shoulder, fearful of putting a foot wrong. No-one should have to submit to bullying or intimidation. Encouraging reps to handle individual problems before they escalate will hopefully free the officer-team to focus on mobilising members for collective action to achieve a successful outcome, whether that be total victory or a workable solution. A priority now is to overhaul school policies on workplace bullying and ensure that sickness and absence policies are fair and are seen to be reasonable. The intention is to develop model policies through effective consultation with those involved.

Recovery

Venda pointed out that genuine in-school support for recovery has been inadequate or completely absent. Anyone working with children over the last two years has witnessed the enormous increase in emotional and behavioural disturbance, often involving identifiable mental health issues. But those children have been left in limbo – undiagnosed and without dedicated support. This not only disadvantages all children, particularly

those already vulnerable, but increases the pressure on staff who feel helpless and undervalued, knowing what is required but not having the resources or the time to provide for individual needs. The result is a growing alienation from the profession, which has worrying implications at a time when teacher shortages and lack of funding threaten the future of education, and when a time-bomb of disaffected young people is waiting to be triggered.

Preparing for action

Redbridge has an excellent record for participation in ballots. In the words of the Secretary's report for the 2022 AGM: 'Redbridge did well in the pay survey with the best turnout in the whole country. With 55%... we proved it is possible to beat the ballot threshold of 50%. We are 'recognised as [one of] the best organised district[s] in the Union'. We shouldn't however be complacent. We still need to build on this strength, through developing the role of reps, ensuring members' details are up to date, making direct contact with individuals (retired members to the phone banks!) and encouraging people to become involved and to vote.

Meetings

We touched briefly on the way forward for District/branch meetings. The pandemic has already offered opportunities for experimenting with different formats and Zoom worked well for those home-working or juggling domestic duties with long hours in school. Venda is keen to maximise participation and remove barriers to attendance, engaging more members in local activism, and the hybrid model used for the AGM, combining remote access with in-person dialogue, is likely to be the preferred option.

Redbridge is in a good position for achieving a productive year ahead.

Liz Dolan

The Home Secretary's Rwanda fiasco: Playing the race card

The present Home Secretary, Priti Patel, has been waging a vicious war against refugees as part of the contemporary tradition of Tory policy against the poor and defenceless, especially those with dark skins. But then, as the Government tells us, there is no systemic racism in the country, so skin-colour doesn't come into it. It is completely useless to expect compassion from such people, or to take their public statements about their vicious policy of removing asylum-seekers to Rwanda at face value.

But Ms Patel might reflect on the inevitable association with the desperate history of such events; has she ever spoken to an ethnic Tatar?

Who is responsible for people trafficking?

To begin with, this idea that it will deter the 'people-trafficking criminals', doesn't make much sense. I doubt if any of the thousands crossing the Channel in small boats are being forced to do so against their will - quite the opposite. The individuals who the present Home Secretary and the PM refer to as 'people-trafficking criminals' are providing a service for which, in the absence of a legal route to claim asylum from outside the country, there is an urgent demand. However, by setting up a commercial arrangement to ship people against their will to Rwanda, the Government is effectively participating in true people-trafficking itself. In any case, penalising the victims of this supposed 'crime' seems a strange way to deter the perpetrators. Maybe locking up the victims of domestic abuse would deter violent partners? Offshore Women's refugees?

People trafficking or people smuggling

It is essential to separate 'people-trafficking' (against their will) from 'people-smuggling' (assisting refugees). The Government would like to pretend that they are the same thing. They are not. Unfortunate refugees fleeing warzones have very little choice, and quite rightly expect that what the Home Office constantly refers to as 'our proud tradition of hospitality', applies to them, especially as many are victims of torture. Local communities still maintain this tradition, even in remote parts of the country. The Government does not.

Previous responses to migration emergencies

In previous decades when thousands were expelled from Uganda and hundreds of thousands of boat people fled Vietnam the (Tory) Governments of the day made comprehensive arrangements for acceptance, accommodation, and integration. I suspect both racism



Vietnamese boat people: government made comprehensive arrangements

and Islamophobia play a part in today's rhetoric and policy choices, although plainly they are an extension of Teresa May's 'hostile environment' mantra. Mrs May is, of course, a devout Christian, as the frequent photographs of her leaving church on Sunday mornings, made clear, apparently without deliberate irony.

The reality of Rwanda

While the idea of the Rwanda trans-shipment project is obviously a nonsense as regards deterrence of the people-smugglers, another very serious aspect is the choice of Rwanda as a destination. Several refugees from Rwanda were granted asylum in Britain as recently as last year; the country does not have a good reputation for human rights at home or abroad. How it can possibly be safe to relocate asylum-seekers to Kigali is difficult to see, when as authoritative a commentator as Michela Wrong* refers to Rwanda as 'an African Regime gone bad.' Ms Patel and her parents were economic migrants from Uganda before the Idi Amin period; she was lucky not to encounter the present Government's policies on arrival or she might have found herself being shipped off to central Africa.

* **'Do Not Disturb: The story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad.'** Michela Wrong, 2021, Fourth Estate, London.

**Edward Milner
(Chair, Sante Refugee Mental Health Access Project)**

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Memorial to the asbestos victims unveiled in Barking

International Workers' Memorial Day, held on 28 April every year, brings together workers and their representatives to **remember the dead and fight for the living**. The event highlights the importance of protecting workers from dangerous and unhealthy working conditions and practices.

This year, trades unionists in East London came together on the day in Barking Town Square to join in the unveiling of a memorial to the victims of asbestos poisoning.

NEU member and Barking Trades Council Secretary, Susan Aitouaziz, has worked long and hard with fellow trade unionists and the Borough council to place a suitable memorial in the town square to the victims of asbestos. The new memorial was formally unveiled in front of a sizeable crowd, including Barking council leader, Darren Rodwell, and local MP Jon Cruddas.

Production and Impact of Asbestos

Asbestos was widely used in industry and construction as insulation and as material for car brake-shoes before its poisonous properties were widely understood.

One of the largest firms producing and processing asbestos – Cape International Holdings - had plants in

Barking, and campaigners now assert that Cape products were at the heart of the mesothelioma epidemic in the UK.

Mesothelioma is an incurable cancer caused by inhaling asbestos dust. It can take between 20 and 60 years for the disease to develop following exposure. Around 2,500 people a year are dying in the UK from this disease. Women have fallen victim to the disease because of particles inhaled while washing family members' working clothes.

Current Campaign

But campaigners allege that Cape downplayed the fatal risks of working with asbestos, encouraged others to suppress information, withheld vital data and lobbied governments to water-down allowable exposure limits and product warnings.

Jodie Bull is the Support Manager for the London Asbestos Support Awareness Group. She explained that the group is now asking Cape to donate £10 million to mesothelioma research.

Bob Archer

Please get in touch if you would like to respond to this article by writing to mike321peters@gmail.com



Schools are one of the workplaces where staff are likely to be exposed to asbestos without even suspecting its presence. A strong turnout of retired and working Barking and Dagenham teachers joined TUC Regional Secretary Sam Gurney and Jon Cruddas MP at the ceremony when the memorial was unveiled