

Death at Empire Paper Waste

On Friday January 23, Truster Hlatshwayo, a worker at Empire Paper Waste, fell into a paper shredding machine and died. It appears that she had been standing on a pile of cardboard, and was feeding bits of waste into the machine below her when she slipped. The horror of the accident resulted in an immediate work stoppage, as other workers demanded that management take action. Workers claimed that a number of machines at the factory were unsafe and they refused to resume work until their safety could be ensured.

Empire Paper Waste is a small factory in Industria. The three directors who jointly own the factory also function as management at the plant. There is a total workforce of about 70. At the factory piles of waste paper and cardboard are shredded and baled. This is then collected into trucks and transported to a bigger recycling plant. Because of the nature of the work done, conditions are particularly dangerous.

According to the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAU) the factory has only recently been organised. There is still no formal recognition agreement between the union and management.

As soon as the accident occurred the union asked the Technical Advice Group (TAG) to assist them in evaluating safety conditions at the plant. On Monday January 26 members from TAG, a union official and some workers inspected the factory. They were accompanied by a director and a factory inspector. According to TAG conditions at the factory were generally bad. The floor was covered in piles of old paper and cardboard, particularly around the shredding machine and the baling machines. The cardboard on the floor was slippery and difficult to stand on. There were a number of roof leakages and poor drainage. It became clear that a thorough clean-up of the factory was necessary.

At the shredding machine it was found that workers stand on piles of waste while feeding cardboard into the machine. In addition the machine is situated below ground level, so that workers have to bend over while feeding cardboard into it. The workers said that they preferred to stand on the left of the machine so that they could feed paper with their right hands. The single stop switch was however on the right hand side of the machine. This makes it inac-

cessible to workers standing on the left in cases of emergency. It was also found that the machine takes some time to stop after being switched off. The workers said that it took up to five minutes to stop. There were some missing blades on the shredding machine, meaning that the shaft is probably out of balance. The biggest problem however was that there was no guard between the workers and the machine. TAG recommended that a fence also be built on both sides of the conveyor belt which leads from the shredding machine. This would prevent workers from falling onto the conveyor. Numerous other problems were also discovered at the factory. Workers complained that the dust level in the shredding room was too high. There is inadequate ventilation, the only ventilation coming through the door and windows. The workers said that the paper masks with which they are provided last half-a-day, yet management change these only weekly. Workers complained that heavy duty trucks in the yard had no power steering, of reverse gears not standing in place, and a number of other faults.

As a result of the inspection, the workers and TAG made a number of recommendations which were subsequently included in an agreement with management. The factory inspector ordered the closure of the shredding machine until a guard was put on, as well as a number of other orders. PWAU says that management has now agreed to repair all defects on the trucks and to send trucks to the municipal testing ground for roadworthy tests. All other machines found to be unsafe were put out of operation, whilst the factory was cleaned up. A guard is to be fitted to the shredding machine and a second emergency stop switch, on the left, is to be fitted. A fence will also be built on both sides of the conveyor belts. The union also negotiated the establishment of a "safety committee" at the factory. This committee will comprise of three workers and one director, and will report to the directors in future. They will be trained by the union during working hours at full pay.

At the time of writing, PWAU reported that one machine had since begun working. In the meantime an inquest into the causes of the accident is to be held. The union says that it is still trying to negotiate compensation for Truster's children. At the time of the accident she was 24 years old. She was unmarried and has two children, both under five years of age. The tragic lesson once again is that only workers themselves - through their unions - can ensure health and safety standards on the shopfloor.

(Coletane Markham, February 1987)