

# Production lies

After hearing reports that women workers at the National Semiconductor microchip factory in Greenock were suffering cancers, fertility problems, reproductive illnesses and miscarriages, local advice worker Jim McCourt set up Phase 2, a group representing sick employees. Here, he describes the company's response to his concerns – a dirty tricks campaign that included spying on McCourt and the sick and dying women who worked at the company.



photo: Janice McNab

**JIM McCOURT:** The safety campaigner says a National Semiconductor dirty tricks campaign using spies, company ringers and media spin, will not silence him.

**A** "Crisis management communications plan" prepared by National Semiconductor, a US-headquartered silicon chip manufacturer based in Greenock, Scotland, is a case history in how unscrupulous companies can use political spin and dirty tricks to undermine workplace safety campaigns.

The internal company document, dated 19 January 1998, outlines a long-term strategy to subdue those concerned with the health of

current and former employees from the plant.

The communications plan, left anonymously outside my office, reveals that local public relations company, Beattie Media, was retained as part of the company's communications team to advise on and help implement the dirty tricks campaign.

Also part of the communications team assembled for this purpose is the doctor retained as the company's occupational health adviser and the company's nurse.

The detailed strategy also included "utilising Beattie Media female staff members to pose as clean room workers." The hope was that the company could dupe journalists, and scupper a BBC investigation into the company's health record.

The document describes plans to "gather as much information as possible on Inverclyde Occupational Health Project and Jim McCourt" and to "use all information available dis-

creetly to undermine the individuals and groups involved" – I was instrumental in the creation of this project and the Phase 2 support group for concerned National Semiconductor workers, as part of my job as manager of the Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre.

Around this time my office was burgled and I was intimidated in the street at the end of a Phase 2 support group meeting. Both incidents were reported to the police at the time.

I was dealing with a company that was not only vehemently anti-union but that had a firm grasp on the influence they held in the local community, politically and economically.

The company plan includes the creation of a fully equipped "communications operations office" and notes it should establish contact with "possible 'supporters' of National such as Argyll and Clyde Health Board and other semiconductor companies including NEC, Motorola, Seagate, Burr Brown."

National Semiconductor has admitted it was behind the surveillance. Company spokesperson Allison Smith said: "We wanted to find out more about... an organisation which was encouraging our staff to take legal action against us."

However, the communication plan suggests its motivation goes beyond self-defence, with its strategy guide saying it should "use, discreetly and sensitively, all available information to undermine the credibility of such individuals and groups."

## Workers fight back: Phase 2

Grace Morrison is secretary of the National Semiconductor workers' support group, Phase 2.

She told *Hazards*: "I worked in the factory for 16 years and developed my illness soon after left. I had absolutely no idea of the capacity of the chemicals I was working with.

"It was when I visited Jim McCourt that I was given access to the information. I found it astounding that a company is allowed to keep this type of information from its workforce. The irony is that on some occasions I was the first aider responsible for the whole of the nightshift. At the very least I should have been given the appropriate chemical information required to perform my duties adequately.

"As a group we have been through many things and have seen a cynical side to life we never thought existed. This latest development involving the Communications Plan has shocked us; to a person we fully support Jim and his family. To be subject to this type of pressure is utterly disgraceful."

Phase 2 has been going for approaching four years and has established links with US workers who feel their health has suffered as a result of their exposures in the workplace, with US campaign groups and with leading academics.

Phase 2 records show at least 170 workers have health complaints they believe may be related to their work at National Semiconductor.

Phase 2, Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre, 16 Nicolson St., Greenock, PA15 1JX, Scotland. Tel: 01475 888 039. US action: Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition [www.svtc.org](http://www.svtc.org)

**The West of Scotland Hazards Group:** Provides support to workers and assists campaigning and single interest groups.

West of Scotland Hazards Group, c/o IAERC, 16 Nicolson St, Greenock, Scotland, PA16 1JX. Tel: 01475 888039. email: [iaerc@gconnect.com](mailto:iaerc@gconnect.com)



photo: Janice McNab

**SPIN DOCTORED:** Jim McCourt and Phase 2 chair Helen Clark, outside the National Semiconductor plant where a management plan aimed to “discreetly” undermine their health campaign.

### HSE’s “preposterous” studies

Government research into health fears at National Semiconductor’s Greenock plant is designed to fail, top scientists have said. Dr Joe LaDou of the University of California School of Medicine, San Francisco, told *Hazards* the design of a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) cancer research study at the National Semiconductor plant was “preposterous” and would miss any cancer risk (*Hazards* 70).

In an open letter to HSE, LaDou and other eminent occupational health specialists from the US, Scotland and England, warned that HSE’s study design will not have the necessary worker numbers or job or exposure information to identify cancer risks. The findings are due to be released later this year.

LaDou warned that HSE risked repeating mistakes made in an earlier study of possible reproductive problems at the plant. A 1998 HSE-backed report had concluded there was no excess miscarriage risk, but its methodology led to stinging criticisms of HSE in the *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health* (*Hazards* 65).

“We do not want to see the HSE dismiss concerns about cancer in semiconductor workers in the same fashion,” LaDou said.

I have reported the alleged illegal surveillance and Strathclyde Police has confirmed that detectives are conducting an investigation. And I am also preparing a civil action to sue the firm for illegally spying on me.

I hope the investigation can determine whether or

not their activities included anything that spilled over into a personal or private sphere. The whole episode has had a profound effect on my family, so much so that I have resigned from my job.

After I finish in my current post I intend to expose fully all those complicit in the

communications plan, make them accountable to me.

Jim McCourt works for Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre and is a founder member of Phase 2.

See National Semiconductor’s secret plan: The confidential plan is available in full on the *Hazards* website at [www.hazards.org/haz76/natsemi.htm](http://www.hazards.org/haz76/natsemi.htm)

### What’s new in Europe?



**Speak up on noise!** The TUC wants you to lobby your MEP in support of a new, improved European noise law. A TUC briefing on the noise Directive spells out changes TUC wants to see, covering protective equipment, health surveillance and worker consultation.

TUC says the existing proposals place far too much faith in hearing protectors. US government research recently confirmed hearing protectors do not match industry claims on their performance. The same research found that hearing damage starts at noise levels of 80dB, much less than half the noise intensity (85dB) at which the Directive requires health surveillance (*Hazards* 69).

TUC adds that the worker consultation requirements should be improved to say that workers and/or their representatives must be consulted over risk assessments, action plans, decisions on protective equipment and health surveillance.

More on the TUC safety site: Current draft text of the Directive [www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/tuc-3330-f0.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-3330-f0.cfm) and the related TUC briefing [www.tuc.org.uk/h\\_and\\_s/tuc-3861-f0.cfm](http://www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-3861-f0.cfm)

### Unions win low fibre standard

Proposed amendments to the Euro law on risks from exposure to asbestos at work have been published. Laurent Vogel, of the European union safety think tank TUTB, comments: “On one point, the ETUC position has been accepted: the limit-value will be 0.1 fibres [per ml] instead of the initially proposed value of 0.2 fibres. The position of UNICE (the employers’ confederation) was 0.3 fibres... The proposal is still quite weak (mainly about the possible exceptions). Any comment from you could be useful since the proposal has to be submitted to the European Parliament where amendments can be introduced.”

Contact: Laurent Vogel, BTS-TUTB, Bd du roi Albert 2, 5, B-1210, Brussels, Belgium. email: [lvogel@etuc.org](mailto:lvogel@etuc.org) ETUC’s web page on asbestos: [www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/asbestos.html](http://www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/asbestos.html)

TUTB’s newsletter is now available online. at: [www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/newsletter.html](http://www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/newsletter.html)