

PCB-TRANSFORMER FIRE SPURS UNION PROTESTS, UTILITY ISSUES GUIDELINES

An unusual fire involving a transformer filled with flame-retardant polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) has spurred a union protest and led Toronto Hydro Electric Commission to issue safety guidelines dealing with such equipment. PCBs have been found hazardous to human health and the environment, and production of the insulating fluid is being phased out in the U. S. The fire occurred Dec. 9 in an underground vault in downtown Toronto. A Toronto Hydro source said a fault in a protective device on a 1,500 kva transformer apparently burned a hole near the top of the tank, spilling several gallons of the PCBs - insulating fluid. As this fluid was exposed to the arc of the fault, it apparently caught fire or was vaporized. The utility source said that most of the fluid was retained in the transformer tank and did not burn. Firefighters and utility workers at the scene were exposed to the vaporized fluid.

At a press conference Jan. 9, a full month after the fire, an official of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 1 charged that Toronto Hydro had never informed its workers of the health hazards of PCBs, though the utility had been aware of such hazards for more than four years. During the press conference another union official said that on Dec. 28 a work crew had been sent to a vault adjoining the one where the fire occurred and that men in this crew were also exposed to PCBs contamination. The official said that "several of our workers later showed symptoms of PCBs poisoning." Two workers at the conference said they suffered skin rashes on the face, lips and hands similar to cold sores, nausea, headaches and eye irritations.

A Toronto Hydro official said the vault was decontaminated and the men who went into the vault wore protective equipment. A union official responded that the protective equipment had never been tested against PCBs and that the PCBs insulating fluid is so fine "that it goes straight through the gear. It soaks it up like a paper towel."

A Toronto Hydro official said that when the utility learned in 1973 of the hazardous nature of PCBs it had ceased buying flame-retardant transformers but had not issued special instructions for dealing with the 43 PCBs-filled units already on its system. This official said last week that some U. S. utilities have hundreds of such units on their systems and he had never heard of a fire or other accident involving the PCBs-filled units.

In its list of safety guidelines, issued at least partially in response to union demands, Toronto recommended that curbs or retainers be built around PCBs transformers to contain the fluid in case of a spill. The guidelines also suggest the use of protective clothing and other precautions in the handling of the fluid and the cleanup of spills. Further, the guidelines recommend procedures for fighting fires in which PCBs are involved. Toronto Hydro is making the guidelines available to customers who have PCBs-filled transformers on their premises.

Reprinted from January 30, 1978 Issue of Electrical Week.
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