

Security checks tightened after

high-level alert Special report: British nuclear industry

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Tough new security checks are to be imposed at nuclear power stations after a guard employed to protect a complex attempted to sabotage the site's computers.

The patrolman triggered a high-level security alert that led to a shutdown of the station's automatic access control system, locking doors electronically to effectively close it, as colleagues started searching for an intruder.

Leaked documents obtained by the Guardian show that the guard had never been vetted and had two undisclosed criminal convictions.

Internal Department of Trade and Industry memos marked "restricted" reveal that as a result all security staff, including existing employees, will from March be required to undergo security tests.

Written by Peter Hatton, head of security in the government's office for civil nuclear security, the documents refer to a security breach at an unnamed station which was the "deliberate action of a member of the site security force".

No details are divulged but the station is understood to be the Bradwell magnox reactor in Essex, run by state-owned BNFL and the nearest nuclear power generator to London.

The guard is believed to have hacked into Bradwell's computer system to alter sensitive information. "He got into one of the systems and wiped the records. The security people are still very touchy when

we try to find out exactly what happened," said an industry employee.

BNFL said last night it was unable to provide further information but the incident, in June 1999, which was never disclosed nationally, was considered so serious that a working party was formed to review security.

Mr Hatton says in his memo: "The incident did highlight the danger of not conducting retrospective vetting particularly of those individuals such as members of the security police force who enjoy a freedom of movement over the whole of a site and have a high degree of trust placed in their integrity."

From March this year more than 500 guards, including hundreds of existing personnel, will be subjected to 10-yearly tests including security service, court and credit clearance, and taking up references.

New recruits have since April 1998 been required to undergo less stringent checks but employees in post before that date, including the Bradwell guard, were not covered. The guard's two criminal convictions would not necessarily have led to clearance being denied, records the DTI note.

Jack Dromey, who represents security staff as national secretary of the Transport & General Workers Union, said: "Employers have a duty not to put the public and fellow employees at risk by penny-pinching or through sloppy procedures."

Another union official said: "Lunatics, industrial spies or terrorists could have walked through the gates with a badge that almost anyone could get."

The new security tests will apply to British Energy civilian security staff at

Dungeness B, Hartlepool, Hinkley B, Sizewell B, Hunterston, Torness and two Heysham power stations, plus BNFL magnox employees at Oldbury, Wylfa, Dungeness A, Sizewell A, Hinckley Point A, Berkeley and Bradwell.

A spokesman for British Energy said: "We understand the need for such arrangements and are happy to comply."

The department of trade and industry confirmed the new checks but played down the Bradwell incident, saying security was constantly under review.

"There has been an incident in 1999 which, although it did not cause a breach of security, caused a review of security and in the light of that review revised procedures are to be introduced," a spokesman said.

The bigger security companies, MPs and trade unionists have campaigned against "cowboy" guards for years.

The government has published a bill requiring the 250,000 guards, bouncers, wheelclaspers and private investigators working in the security industry to be vetted after a significant minority were found to have criminal convictions.