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Student riots: Would SME owners be liable for damage?

Management

Written by Ian Penfold, Safety Film Specialist at Solar Gard UK

Friday, 12 November 2010

The student riots in London throw up some important questions for UK businesses.

For most people, one photograph sticks out above all others this week. The moment a rioting student demonstrator kicked in a window at Millbank Tower has adorned most newspaper front-pages to illustrate the impact of this violent demonstration.

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Most observers will regard this as an act of reckless vandalism. However, to any small business owner up to date on his or her legal obligations, the image of how the broken glass actually stayed relatively intact after being attacked tells another story.

The remarkable fact is, despite press coverage being full of reports of broken glass, no one was seriously injured or killed by a lethal shard of glass. This was not down to luck. It was down to a micro-thin technology that all small business owners should be aware of – safety window film.

Ever since 1992, when Health, Safety and Welfare Regulation 14 came into force, business premise owners have been required to ensure that “every window or other transparent or translucent surface in a wall, partition, door or gate should, where necessary for reasons of health or safety, be of a safety material or be protected against breakage of the transparent or translucent material; and be appropriately marked or incorporate features to make it apparent.”

This regulation, designed to protect building occupants as well as passersby, applies to a wide range of workplaces including offices, shops, schools, hospitals, hotels and places of entertainment.

In other words, the business owner is responsible for keeping their glass safe, or they could be held liable and face legal consequences if someone gets hurt or killed due to poor safety practices. The cost implications of this, for many small businesses, could be catastrophic.

Further threats to glass windows

It's not just rioters who break windows. Last year the media reported the death of a young man who died after cutting himself when he threw his

girlfriend through the front window of a well-known high street retailer. The danger posed by the glass was probably avoidable had government regulations been followed. Many of us will also have seen the newspaper photographs of the windowpane that fell dozens of stories onto Old Broad Street, narrowly missing passersby.

With the London 2012 Olympics around the corner, let's also not forget the growing threat of terrorism - almost 90 percent of all injuries from a bomb blast are related to flying glass, rather than the blast itself. In an explosion, glass particles can travel at speeds of up to 150 mph. If, for example, a bomb explodes 400 metres away from the building, glass from a broken window can hit a person, 5 metres away, at a speed of 75 metres per second.

The risk of an explosion does not apply solely to large cities. The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) now advises that building designers take counter-terrorism measures into consideration when designing public open spaces. This reflects the threat posed not just to urban office buildings, but to public areas such shopping centres, implicating the small businesses working within them.

Installing safety window film reinforces existing glass and helps to hold broken pieces together in the event of an explosion, greatly reducing the chance of glass causing property damage, injury or death.

Glass safety: Get it covered

Millbank Tower was built in 1963. Like most British business premises, it was built before 1992, when Regulation 14 came into force. Fortunately, the owners of the building took the necessary steps to retrofit safety window film. This kept both the baying mob, and the police assigned to restrain them, safe from serious injury.

Retrofitting safety window film is a relatively inexpensive and unobtrusive process, but most business premises are not up to scratch when it comes to glass safety. Prospective tenants should seriously question the landlord on whether the property meets Regulation 14, before taking on a new lease.

While the clean up operations at Millbank will no doubt be costly, the price paid to have safety window film installed has proven its worth. Can you say the same about your business?

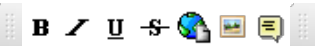
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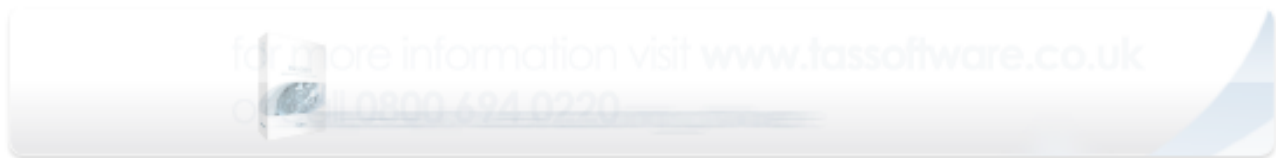


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