

Teachers' union puts focus on safety issues

AN AGGRESSIVE CAMPAIGN run by the Connetquot Teachers Association (CTA) is bringing long needed attention to safety and health issues that were dismissed, discounted, or denied altogether by the Connetquot school district.

Faced with a wide range of health complaints by teachers in the district, the leadership of the Connetquot Teachers Association (CTA), a 700-member union based in Suffolk County, Long Island ratcheted up the fight. Enlisting outside help and strong membership and community support, they broke through administration roadblocks.

After receiving an inadequate response from the district's administration to the union's long-standing concerns, union officials contacted Wendy Hord, the Director of Safety and Health for the New York State United Teachers. "When we asked her what to do, she said, 'The first thing you want to do is illuminate the problem,'" said CTA vice president Brad Lindell. Hord then recommended that NYCOSH visit the district and conduct a site inspection.

School district held accountable

In late Fall 2006, Hord teamed up with NYCOSH Associate Director Susan O'Brien and local union officials to conduct site inspections at the union's request in several district schools. The district serves over 7000 students in high school, middle school and pre-school.

Prior to the NYSUT/NYCOSH visit, union leaders asked teachers to submit a list of the safety and health problems in their schools.

"We told our members we were going to forward their concerns to the district and make the district accountable," said CTA President Loretta Powell, noting that over 100 emails came back from union members identifying safety and health problems in their school buildings.

Their concerns were also posted on the union's new web site (www.stateofconnetquot.org), which was launched last year. The site quickly became a powerful tool to communicate to union members, school parents, and the community about the step-by-step developments in the union's battle over safety issues with the administration.

Common problems identified by teachers included poor indoor air quality (IAQ), se-

vere moisture and humidity in school classrooms and other areas, water leaks and water damage in classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms, mold and fungal growth, unsanitary conditions and vermin infestation.

These issues, and others, are addressed in the follow-up report NYSUT submitted to the union after the safety and health investigation by Hord and O'Brien. The report confirmed many of the teachers' concerns, particularly about poor indoor air quality and mold growth largely caused by leaking roofs.

"The visit by NYSUT and NYCOSH and the report we got opened up a lot of people's eyes to what was going on here. Since NYCOSH was an outside party with technical capacity and credibility, the administration couldn't deny it anymore," said CTA vice president Brad Lindell. "We used our web site to announce the report was coming—and when it came, we scanned it and put it up on the site, and we also sent it out to all our members," he noted.

Safety report 'proved pivotal'

The NYSUT report proved pivotal in forcing the administration to acknowledge the safety problems in the district. "It was something concrete that we could present to the administration so it wasn't just us complaining anymore," Lindell said. The report details the findings of the investigations conducted in school buildings, describing specific conditions and problems in classrooms, hallways, and other areas. In addition, it cites instances of violations of NYS PESH standards, NYS Department of Education regulations, and provides a series of recommendations to rectify and eliminate safety hazards.

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Standing with Union Vice President Brad Lindell in front of a blocked vent in the middle school building are Teacher Pat Troniar and Counselor Terry Mennona. Many vents are blocked up preventing exchange of air in classrooms and teachers health complaints include sinus infections, asthma, and other problems.

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The report also notes that teachers link many of the conditions and problems to numerous health complaints they have reported. "They are having all kinds of medical problems and these include headaches, drowsiness, pneumonia, asthma, and sinus infections that can't be cleared up," Lindell said.

Violations cited in report

PESH violations noted in the report include the lack of a chemical hygiene plan and a Chemical Hygiene Officer (or committee) which would be responsible for the implementation of the plan. The report also cited many issues related to high school science rooms, such as no eyewash stations, chemical wastetank overflows, and wastetank monitoring equipment that was not working

and had apparently never been functional.

The report concluded that the district "should be concerned about liability for possible EPA violations and continued chemical exposures to students and staff."

The report also called for the formation of the New York State mandated Health and Safety Committee. Under Part 155 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, every school district in the state is required to have such a committee whose members include representatives from each bargaining unit, school administrators, school parents, and other designated experts and members from the community. The intent of the committee is to deal effectively with health and safety issues.

NYSUT provides training in setting up the required

district committee, Hord noted, adding that when it was learned the Connetquot district did not have one, she "worked consistently to make that happen."

NYCOSH is 'valuable partner'

The committee is now established, and the union successfully fought the administration's efforts to undermine it. "There was resistance to the committee. The administration hoped it would go away and cancelled meetings," Lindell said. "But we kept at it, and keep everyone informed on what is happening through the web site, and we got the community involved in our issues."

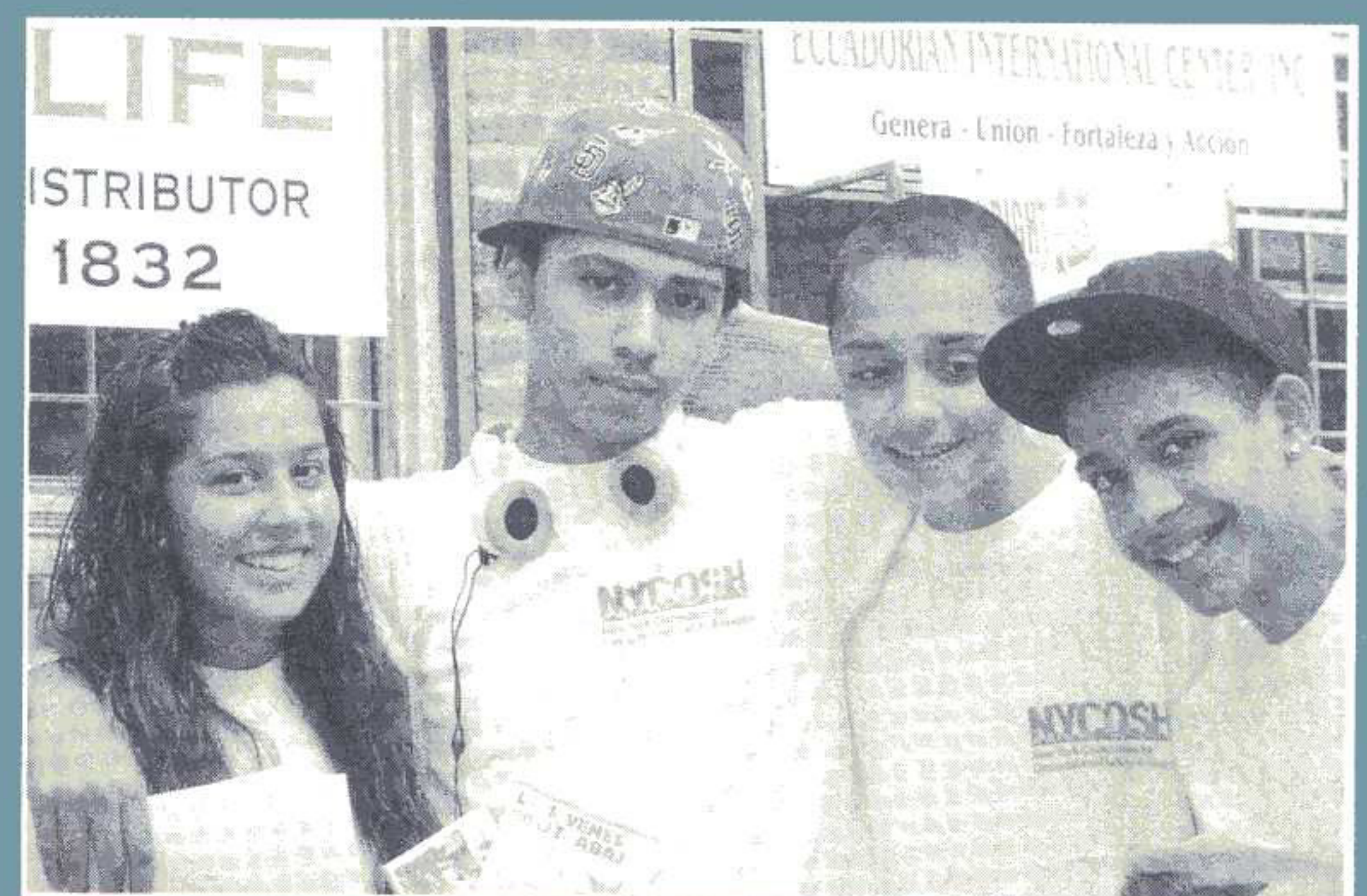
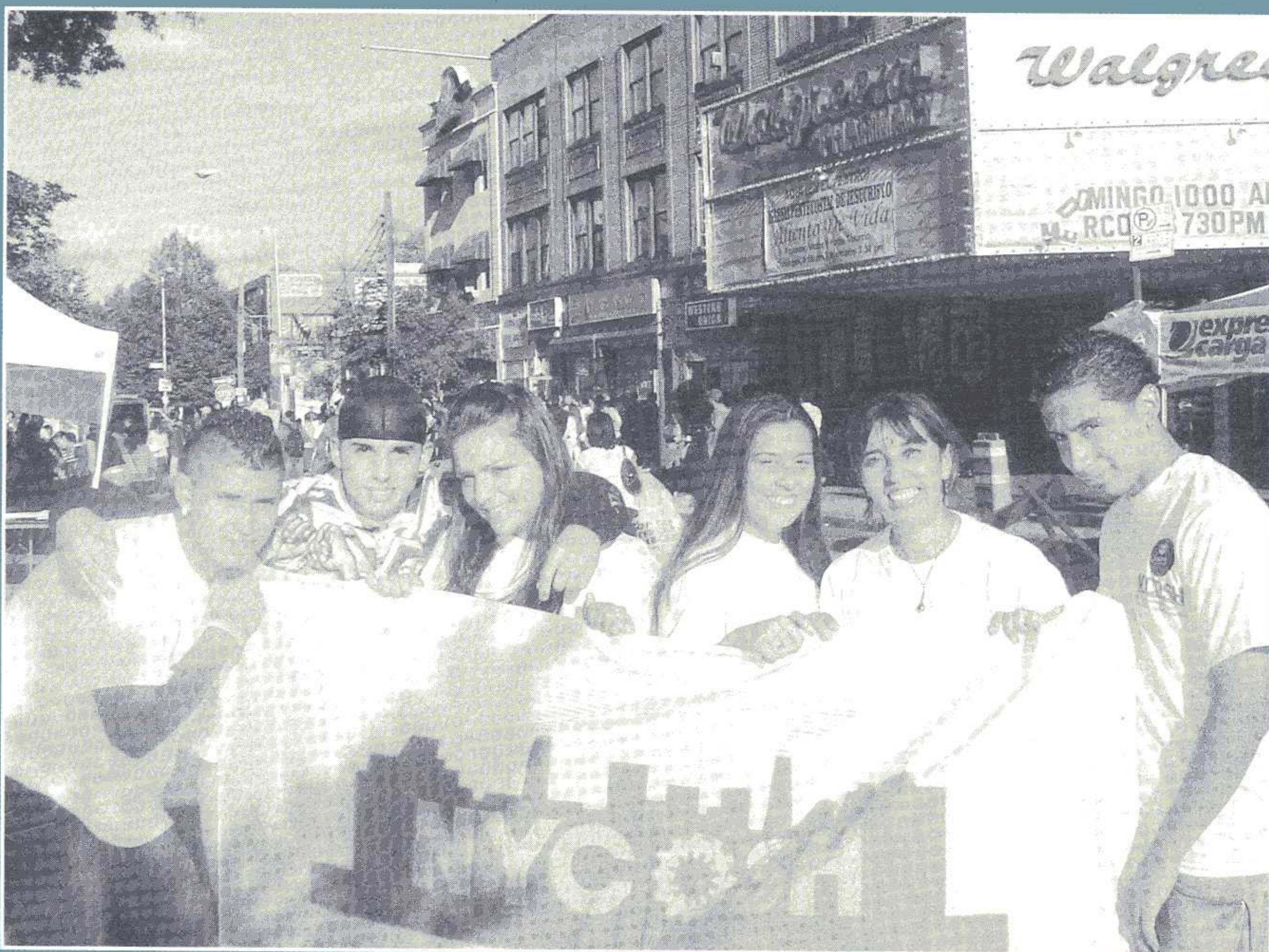
"NYSUT and NYCOSH lit the fire—they gave us the ammunition to take on the health and safety issues and get the committee we needed," said high school science teacher Jimmy McConnell.

"The administration threw up roadblocks but we stayed with the facts."

"Part of the hope of doing an actual walk-through with our members is that they will get a hands-on feel, and a visual feel, of what is supposed to be—so that now ideally they will be able to monitor conditions themselves," Hord said. "This is also a good example of how NYCOSH is both a valuable resource for our members and a valuable partner in helping out locals," she added.

The union is continuing the campaign to call public attention to the health hazards faced by teachers and students. It has taken ads in local newspapers urging residents to visit its website and distribute posters for teachers to place on their lawns and bumper stickers for cars.

Teen worker reach-out



NYCOSH Safety and Health Specialist Luzday Giraldo (second from right in left photo) with teens who took NYCOSH training in youth rights in the workplace. They are shown at the Latino Heritage Month Health Fair held in Corona, Queens in mid-October. The teens reached out to other teens, distributing educational pamphlets, and answering questions about immigrant youth workplace issues.