

# UCATS Momentum

No. 1 March 2004

EXTRA!

A Publication of the Union of Clerical, Administrative & Technical Staff at NYU (UCATS), Local 3882, NYSUT, AFT, AFL-CIO

## FORMALDEHYDE INJURY AT NYU SPARKS UNION SAFETY CAMPAIGN

by Ryan Nuckel, Shop Steward,  
UCATS

An employee at NYU's Dental Center was exposed to toxic chemicals on the job and has been left with a permanent breathing disability. Michelle DePaola was working in the Dental Center's anatomy lab on Thursday, December 18<sup>th</sup> when a shipment of cadavers came in containing more than seven times the safe levels of formaldehyde. Although she began to feel sick that day, Michelle continued working for almost a month before NYU informed her of the exposure, and it wasn't until her union intervened that she was transferred out of the lab.

Michelle said she was immediately affected by the exposure: "Just walking into the room, your eyes burned, your throat burned, everything burned." Thinking she only had the flu, however, she continued working. Although she was wearing a badge that detects formaldehyde levels in the air, the badge wasn't tested for two weeks — and it took NYU another week to inform her of the results.

This was not the first time Michelle has been injured on the job, and there are long-standing environmental problems in the

### **See No Evil, Hear No Evil**

At the OSHA inspection for the Dental Anatomy Lab, no one there from Environmental Services knew anything! A Dean from the Dental Center wasn't aware there was a problem with a worker. At the grievance meeting we had for NYU's violation of the health and safety clause in our contract, there was no one there from Human Resources, Environmental Services or the Dental Center who knew anything! Given a list of questions about Health and Safety in the dental lab, the University said they'd didn't know and would get back to us. Sounds like Martha Stewart or Ken Lay. Nobody knows anything yet laws are broken and (in this case) workers are injured. Shame on NYU!

anatomy lab where she worked. Human waste and body fluids are mopped up by regular maintenance workers and poured into the same sink where employees and students wash their hands. Eye-washes — a standard protection where people have to work with chemicals — were substandard, and many other basic health and safety measures were non-existent in the lab.

The damage to Michelle has

been severe. She has trouble breathing and sleeping and is easily winded. Her doctor has told her that her disability makes her incapable of ever working with cadavers, threatening her plan to one day own her own funeral home. "They took my career away from me," she says of NYU.

Just a few days after the union learned of Michelle's injury, NYU announced that President John Sexton would sign a "self-audit" agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency. The union quickly organized an information picket outside of Bobst Library, during Sexton's photo-op inside.

Her injury has exposed the virtually nonexistent safety standards in her workplace, and sparked an effort by her union — The Union of Clerical, Administrative, and Technical Staff at NYU (UCATS) — to investigate possible health and safety hazards in all of NYU's labs. UCATS contacted both the Environmental Protection Agency and the NYU administration, seeking to make sure that NYU's "self-audit" wouldn't become a free pass to "self-pollute." We also filed a 24-point complaint with the Occupational Safety and Health

(Continued on page 2)

## UCATS and GSOC United Over Health and Safety Concerns

By Susan Price, Shop Steward,  
UCATS

---

**A**fter learning of the health and safety travesty inflicted on our union member, UCATS executive council felt it important to reach out to other laboratory and clinical workers at NYU. UCATS stewards Susan Price and Diana Corzen sent a letter out to other laboratory and clinical workers inviting them to discuss their concerns about health and safety. Because many graduate students also work in laboratories and clinics, we also included GSOC, the union that represents grad students who work in the labs (and offices), to find out more about the working conditions they encounter daily.

On Friday, March 5<sup>th</sup>, we met with UCATS laboratory/clinical workers and representatives from GSOC to assess how widespread unsafe working conditions are in NYU's laboratories, clinics, and offices. Laboratory workers shared some of the hazards they have experienced. These included accidents; episodes of unsafe hazardous chemical storage, transport, and disposal; and faulty safety equipment. One worker even recalled how the location of a particular laboratory put the safety of clerical workers into question. GSOC representatives shared some of their own health and safety grievances with UCATS members, including those at 269 Mercer Street, an office

*Because many graduate students also work in laboratories and clinics, we also included GSOC, the union that represents grad students who work in the labs (and offices), to find out more about the working conditions they encounter daily.*

where excessive mold was discovered.

GSOC's dealings with NYU were strikingly similar to ours. In every case, NYU was less than forthcoming with requested documents and information. And, no one came to their meetings that 'knew anything' (sound familiar?). GSOC's inability to obtain information and get answers, which is within their rights to request, demonstrates an arrogant culture within the management structure of this university. It was reassuring to learn that the avoidance tactics and refusal to share information are not exclusive to UCATS—it is NYU's *modus operandi*! NYU's lack of transparency suggests an air of guilt. If the university was blameless in these cases, why are they unwilling to disclose their records?

The March 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, along with the events over the past month, clearly revealed that safeguarding workers is not one of NYU's priorities, but it has also confirmed what we have suspected all along...NYU will

always put its interests above the health of its workers, and it does not matter whether the worker is faculty, a student, or a union member.

**FORMALDEHYDE INJURY**  
*continued from page 1*

Administration, a government agency that monitors working conditions. A surprise OSHA inspection in early March found numerous violations at the lab.

Meanwhile, NYU administration has repeatedly ignored the union's requests for basic information on NYU environmental practices, in clear violation of the union's contract with the University. Greg Succop, a UCATS organizer, said this stonewalling from top administration is an indication of NYU's "hear-no-evil, see-no-evil management strategy. This was an accident by design. That's what's such an outrage." The union has begun outreach to lab workers across NYU's campus in an effort to ensure that all workers have safe working conditions.

NYU representatives joined labor leaders from throughout the city on March 25<sup>th</sup> to commemorate the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, an incident where 146 garment workers lost their lives in a factory fire where NYU's science building now stands. Union members who work for NYU, however, continue fighting for basic safety measures on the job 93 years after that tragic event.

**LABOR DONATED**