

Local teachers vow to battle reforms

STELLA KARPOUZIS
Correspondent

"We will not back down." That was the chant that echoed in the Markham Centennial Arena at a meeting of York Region's teachers.

About 2,500 teachers gathered at the arena Wednesday night to show their opposition to Education Minister John Snobelen's proposed education reforms, specifically Bill 160.

The purpose of the meeting was to inform the teachers about the proposed legislation and present the group with options. Eileen Lennon, president of the Ontario Teachers Federation (OTF) said that solidarity has been strong at every meeting held this past week across the province, as has opposition to the bill.

Bill 160, currently in its second reading at Queen's Park, would limit class size, cut teacher preparation time, and increase the amount of time teachers spend in front of a class.

With all the other pressures facing teachers early in the school year, Maret Sadem-Thompson, president of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario (FWTAO), was afraid that they weren't being informed. "We're educating the members on the realities, not the rumours."

Marshall Jarvis, from the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, hopes that the government doesn't underestimate the message sent through the meetings. "Ontario teachers are supporting their

(union) leadership, and if the government ignores us, it will be a mistake," he said.

York Region teachers added their voices to those of their union leaders. They spoke out against the bill and claimed the proposed Education Quality Improvement Act has very little to do with the quality of education.

"I have 37 students, and that's common," said Grade 8 teacher Susan Durphy. "But if Snobelen cuts the classes, there won't be enough of us to go around."

Kindergarten teacher Barb Gorman said she's watched educational standards drop over the past few years. "These (government) decisions aren't being made for quality, they're being made for money."

Pam Constable, a provincial executive for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, agreed and called the bill a farce. "It's all about monetary control. The government is getting its billion on the backs of people too young to vote."

Constable is also opposed to the legislation allowing non-contract teachers to teach art, music and phys-ed. "You won't need to be a teacher to be in a classroom," she said, referring to the portion of the bill that would allow specialists to teach certain subjects. "I guess teachers college won't be deciding if you're qualified to be a teacher any more."

"We're angry and fed up," she said, reflecting the general feeling of most of the teachers present that night. "We've been pushed and pushed. If Bill 160 isn't radically altered, we're out."

And if the government and teachers don't come to an agreement about the bill, Constable said, there could be a province-wide strike as early as next week.

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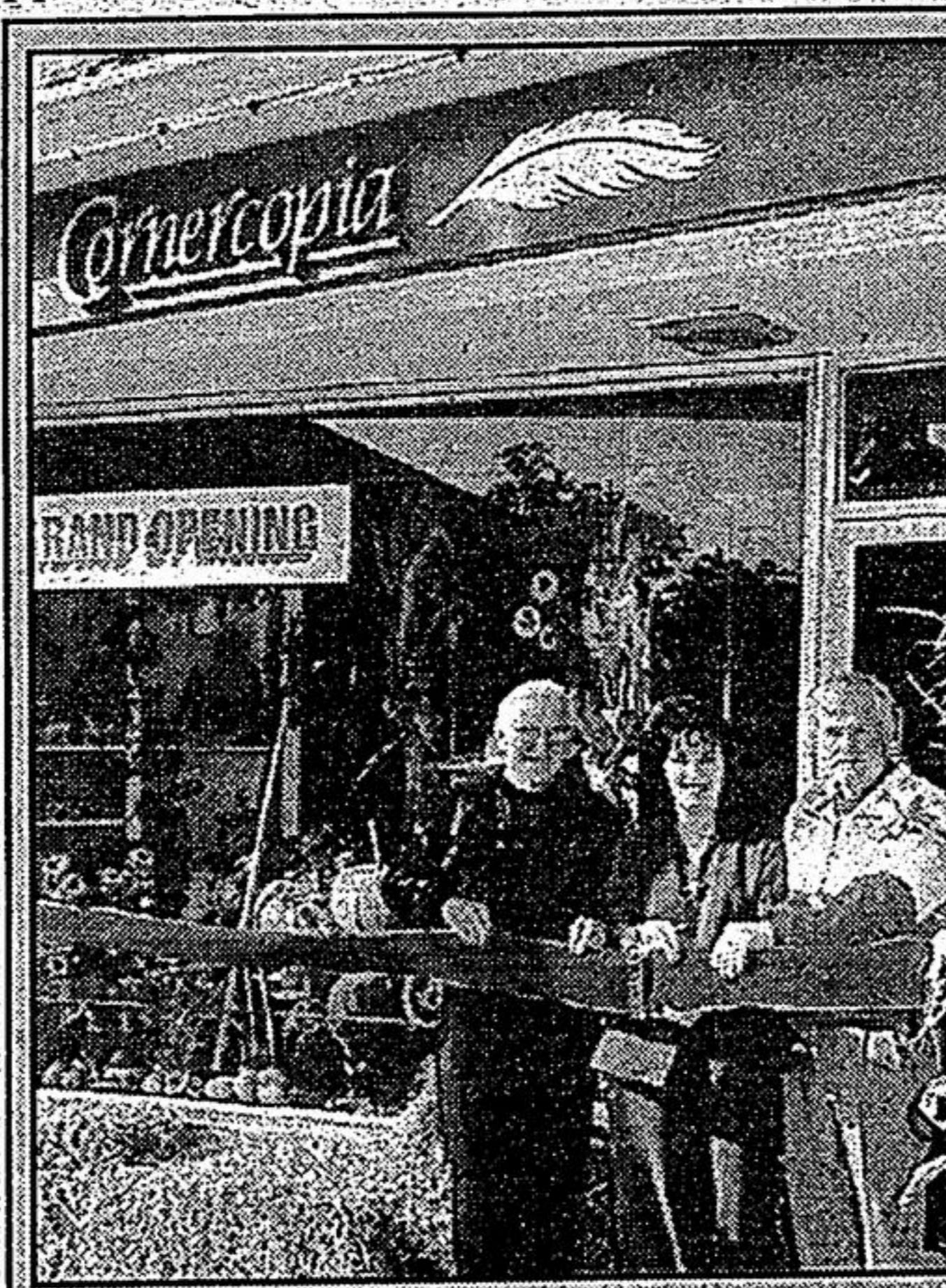
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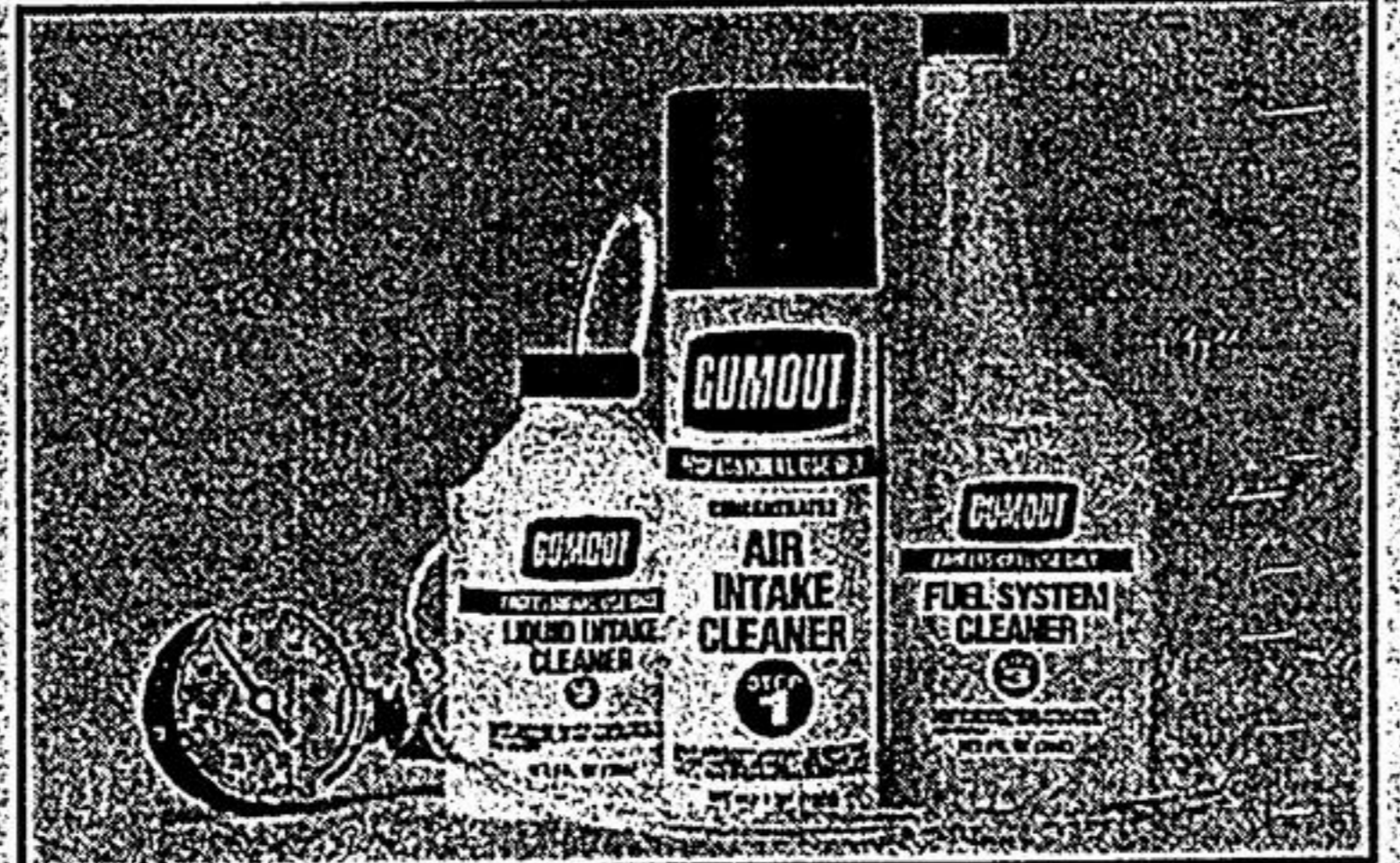
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