

Student as worker

Wages for homework

This feature was written for the chevron by Tim Grant, a fourth year Arts student at University of Waterloo. It suggests that schoolwork must be viewed from the perspective that it is work, and therefore worthy of a wage, and that students should be seen as workers and not as "parasites." We hope by printing this article to open up discussion in this area, and would welcome response to it.

Most of us are at university because we see it as the route to better jobs and higher wages.

With higher wages, we hope to have more power to get what we want out of life - time to develop our interests, to enjoy family and friends - in a word, to do whatever we decide we want to do.

But in recent years, the chances of getting a well-paying job at the end of our 20-odd years of schooling have shrunk. There are fewer jobs available, and many of those available, such as teaching, have become much harder work.

We also find that the pay levels for these jobs are not as high as we expect. With wage controls and staff reductions by both business and government, the picture is becoming grimmer. Statistics Canada estimates that between 1973 and 1980 more than 2.5 million students will receive post-secondary degrees, while only 600,000 jobs requiring these qualifications will become available.

With these things in

mind, it has become very difficult for us to stomach three or four years of hard work and thousands of dollars of debts.

While it is clear our lives as students and our future prospects are increasingly uncertain, it is not as clear what we can do about it. Teachers, postal worker and all workers who receive a wage have an employer whom they confront over how much money they get and how much work they have to do. The outcome of that struggle determines how much time and money they have to do whatever they choose to do.

But for students, housewives and other workers who receive no wage, the absence of a wage has made it appear that we work only "for ourselves", or for husbands and children in the case of housewives. The Wages for Housework Movement, by clearly identifying that the maintaining and raising of the present and future labour force is essential work for the functioning of society, from which all employees benefit, has opened the way for students to see schooling as work.

As in the case of housewives, our lack of a wage has hidden the work we do in school, and has often defined us as parasites on the backs of our parents and the taxpayers.

But schoolwork is work, not only because it involves a lot of hassles, effort and long hours. More fundamentally, it is work because as students, we are actively engaged in producing a very important product - ourselves.

es - as a specifically trained segment of the future labour force. The work we do in school involves both acquiring knowledge and technical competence to perform certain jobs, as well as developing the self-discipline which will enable us to handle the daily routine of our future jobs.

While the work we do in schools appears to be for our own benefit, it is our future employers, who need our skills and self-discipline, who are the real beneficiaries of our work.

Schoolwork certainly feels like work. Even in the best courses, involving the most interesting books, being forced to read those books in a certain time limit, or write book reports, or study them for an exam, becomes an imposition on our time.

For men students, university was always seen as an investment towards a higher future income. The "investment" aspect of our schooling served to hide the work we were doing already.

For women students, university offered the hope of being able to avoid the fate of the full-time, wageless housewife. But as women have discovered, most university-trained women end up either as full-time housewives or in low-paid social service jobs which are extensions of housework.

When a university degree fails to deliver the wages which can satisfy neither men's 'investment' nor women's 'hope' we both confront the reality of schoolwork as unpaid work.

Wagelessness as a discipline

The lack of a wage for our schoolwork keeps us financially dependent on our parents and the state. Our wagelessness forces many of us to take part-time jobs in addition to full-time during what is supposed to be our summer vacation.

We university students are not alone in being forced to take second jobs over and above our schoolwork. In Kitchener's largest downtown high school, three-quarters of the students had part-time jobs in 1974-75. With so many wageless students competing with each other and with other workers for jobs, wages are kept down and those who get jobs are forced to work harder to keep them.

In the same way, our financial dependence on our parents becomes a discipline on them to work longer and harder, and is often the main factor forcing our mothers to take a second job

outside the home, over and above her housework.

Finally, the fact that we don't get paid for our schoolwork, saddling us with large debts when we leave university, forces us to get a job immediately rather than travel, relax or do something we want to do.

Schoolwork and the state

The state has always understood the crucial economic function of schoolwork. One of the clearest statements of this recognition is the U.S. government study entitled "Work in America", published two years ago.

The study reflects a clear perception of society as a huge "social factory" with each institution playing an important role in contributing to the overall profits of the economy. The study argues that schools should be restructured in various ways to reflect even more closely the needs of the labour market.



Newspaper articles about these days with titles such as, "Schooling blamed for unprepared labour" where government and employers complain that the educational system is not providing the disciplined labour force employers want.

The Ontario Federation of Students recently exposed a secret government report in which government officials agreed to adjust tuition, loan and grant levels to "reflect manpower development priorities." In other words, "where growth is desired", tuition would be lower and grants higher for students in those fields where the employers want trained workers.

Thus the state intervenes and manipulates the structure, format, costs and working conditions of schoolwork

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...the way, we will be able to work for ourselves.