

# Free Time

## Wages for Students

Some left-wing students and teachers are opposed to the idea of students being paid a wage to study. According to them, remunerating students would imply a commodification of knowledge and educational establishments. By this logic, though, shouldn't we be asking faculty why they don't give up their salary? Who would work without being paid? Non-recognition of the value of student work strengthens the hierarchical relationship between student and teacher while perpetuating student exploitation at the expense of the least privileged.

Gaining a wage for students is only the beginning[\[1\]](#). Those who claim that this wage would decrease the time we can be free of commodity relations are operating from a pretty elitist understanding of freedom. We already know that capitalism relies on exploiting the unpaid work of millions of workers. Paying us for what we are already doing without pay can liberate hours otherwise dedicated to wage labour. This includes a job done before, after or while studying. A wage for students would help reduce people being stuck in interpersonal relationships due to financial dependence. Moreover, remuneration of unpaid work can reduce financial indebtedness of women and racialized persons, who are disproportionately represented among the ranks of those working for free. Their refund of a loan would also be longer considering the type of jobs available after their degrees[\[2\]](#).

Definitely, the choice of an academic discipline doesn't allow one to consider being free from commodified relations. Whether we study Foucault and Marx or learn how to treat a patient, the field of studies and transmitted knowledge doesn't have an intrinsic emancipatory potential. It's mostly what we do with that knowledge and how we stand in regards to ideological

doctrines transmitted by an educational establishment that has such potential. In order to learn, a student must do more than just attend or excel in his classes; the essentials of work and the burden of emancipation is the responsibility of the student. Consequently, when we present school as an emancipatory space, we join the (neo)liberal discourse that advocates personal development, ambition and fulfillment. However, this discourse disregards the simple quenching of needs. It's a mistake to put forward such views which maintain educational establishment and, at the same time, the relations of exploitation that exist.

However, just like the feminist movement that occurred internationally in the 70s – which focused the struggle for the emancipation of women around access to the labour market instead of recognition of the value of domestic work -, a choice has been made by the dominant fringe of the student movement in Quebec. They focused exclusively on a discourse against the commodification of education by mandatory tuition fees while casting aside the criticism about the role of reproducing the workforce – and therefore capitalism – in educational establishments. This choice helped reinforce, through claims for free education, an idealization of education, thus reducing the recent student struggles to resist against the latest neoliberal reform. When not supporting paid internships, and, more largely, a wage for students, the student movement and faculties put the burden of striving against the commodification of education on those who possess less power: students.

There is no benefit for students in keeping education in its' actual form. However, there is a lot to gain from this for educational establishments and employers. Therefore, it is necessary to reduce the amount of unpaid work in all spheres of life: if there is indeed “something irrepressible in desires that will always make them overflow structures that contain them” [\[3\]](#), pleasure, inherent in the desire to learn,

is smothered by student work conditions that eliminate all possibilities of emancipation. It is by recognizing the student condition for what it is, studded with misery, that we can begin to organize the transformation of education and the actual order of society[4]. Claiming a salary while studying somehow becomes the expression of a radical desire, exposing a totalizing range that it's impossible to reduce to a simple reformist struggle.

The actual working conditions in traditionally feminine fields suggest that a salary will not be enough to recognize all the unpaid work that is done while studying, nor will it end the inherent power dynamics and violence, nor will it allow us to overthrow the process of commodification of education. However, it constitutes a symbolic as well as material first step towards the recognition of reproductive work, allowing us to organize the necessary struggle for the amelioration of students' working conditions and the abolition of unpaid work.

From a practical point of view, the CUTE's wages for students campaign[5] offers a considerable opportunity to develop and apply an analytical grid on the appropriation and depreciation of the students' reproductive work – whether or not they are interns – that can be transferred to all spheres of life. Consequently, it is a premise completely different from previous students strikes, a strike initiated by women and invisibilized persons of the student movement. A strike based on a feminist analysis that allows linking the conditions of students and the conditions of all invisible workers. The next strike will be a women's' strike or will not be. And, the next women's' strike will be an interns' strike!

by **Sandrine Belley, Annabelle Berthiaume et Valérie Simard**

Translation by **Jessy Anglehart-Nunes**

This article was published in the [Winter 2018 issue of the english edition of CUTE Magazine](#).

To learn more about the struggle for the full recognition of student work, to discuss or contribute to it, we can contact us via the [CUTE Campagne sur le travail étudiant](#) page or the [SWUC – Student Work Unitary Committee](#) page.

---

1. A long version of this text will be published in 2018 under the Éditions Remue-ménage in a collective work entitled *Travail invisible des femmes au Québec : un état de la situation*, under the direction of Louise Toupin and Camille Robert. ↩
2. The wage gap between men and women was more than 20% in 2016. The gap was higher among racialized workers, according to the Institut de recherche et d'informations socioéconomiques (IRIS) : <http://iris-recherche.qc.ca/publications/egalite-salariale> ↩
3. (Our translation) Morgane Merteuil. *Pour un féminisme de la totalité*, June 17, 2017, available online : <http://inter-zones.org/article/pour-un-feminisme-de-la-totalite> ↩
4. We are largely inspired by the reasoning of Morgane Merteuil who approaches this opposition between desire and alienation in order to think about emancipation of sex workers. C.f. Merteuil, M. *Pour un féminisme de la totalité*, June 17, 2017, <http://inter-zones.org/article/pour-un-feminisme-de-la-totalite> ↩
5. Comités unitaires sur le travail étudiant, whose review you are reading. ↩