

# Wages for students

*Wages for Students, a pamphlet in the form of a blue book, was written and published anonymously by activists linked to the journal Zerowork during student strikes in Massachusetts and New York in the fall of 1975. Deeply influenced by the Wages for Housework Campaign's analysis of capitalism and emerging in relation to struggles such as Black Power, anticolonial resistance, and the antiwar movements, the authors sought to fight against the role of universities as conceived by capital and its state. The pamphlet debates the strategies of the student movement at the time and denounces the regime of forced unpaid work imposed every day upon millions of students. Wages for Students was an affront to and a campaign against the neoliberalization of the university, at a time when this process was just beginning. Forty years later, the highly profitable business of education not only continues to exploit the unpaid labor of the students, but now also makes them pay for it. Today, when the student debt situation has us all up to our necks, and when students around the world are refusing to continue this collaborationism, we again make this booklet available "for education against education."*

## Wages for Students

**(A pamphlet in the form of a blue book, 1975)**

### **The Mental Discipline Factory in 1965**

"It is morning. The Weatherman declares daylight and places the sun (rain, snow, clouds, etc., whichever is most appropriate) in the sky. And like mechanized clock-time, the

earth tick-tocks around the sun again.” John Doe belongs to Unit 12 of the Elm City Mental Discipline Factory. He is Our Example of the day. John is Average, or was until he Went Wrong. He was sitting in Our physical-need room with his fellow mass-productions, pencil in right hand, paper on table, mind on his own work, busy. By the way, for some background information.

The original excuse for Our physical-need room’s existence was for “producing and distributing food to supplement Our disciplinary teachings with physical encouragement and semi-satisfaction.” But its purpose is now a gathering place for John Does who aren’t scheduled for anything more important. Here we teach them obedience, a very, very, very important part of overall mental discipline. But about John Doe. He was Alright until he discovered the audacity to get up and go right over to Our water fountain and drink two huge gulps of water, completely filling his mouth and quenching his thirst at our expense.

Now, You’ve all been disciplined to realize that is not the purpose of Our water fountains. You’ve been programmed to understand they’re for disciplinary temptation and have a part in Our Plan only for that purpose. You have to master your thirst, not like John. He is bad, bad, bad, bad. One of Our supervisors had to have him escorted to the medical surgeon who promptly sewed his lips together. Some of Us think John’s punishment was too slight for such a disgraceful show of disobedience. But We do still believe in mercy. Principle is principle but what is principle worth if humanity is ignored.

Study significance for lecture tomorrow.

*(Written in school by a high school student)*

## **What is Schoolwork?**

Going to school, being a student is work. This work is called schoolwork although it is not usually considered to really be

work since we don't receive any wages for doing it. This does not mean that schoolwork is not work, but rather that they have taught us to believe that only if you are paid do you really work. Schoolwork takes the form of many different tasks of varying intensities and combinations of skilled and unskilled labor. For example, we are to learn to sit quietly in classrooms for long periods of time and not cause a disturbance. We are to listen attentively and attempt to memorize what is being said. We are to be obedient to teachers. Occasionally we learn certain technical skills that make us more productive when we work in jobs outside of school that require these skills. Most of the time, however, we spend doing a lot of unskilled labor. The characteristic common to all the specific tasks that schoolwork involves is Discipline, i.e. forced work. Sometimes we are disciplined, which means that we are forced to work by others (teachers, principals, and guards). At other times we are self-disciplined, which means that we force ourselves to do schoolwork. Not surprisingly, the different categories of schoolwork used to be called Disciplines.

Obviously, it is cheaper and better for Capital if we do our own disciplining. This saves paying for more teachers, principals, and guards who are waged workers and have to be paid something. As self-disciplined students, we perform the double task of doing schoolwork and making ourselves do it. That is why school administrators place so much emphasis on the self-disciplinary aspects of school while trying to keep the costs of disciplining us to a minimum. Like all capitalistic institutions, schools are factories. Grading and tracking are ways of measuring our productivity within the school-factory. Not only are we trained to take our future "position in society" but we are also being programmed to go to our "proper place." The school-factory is an essential step in the selection process that will send some to sweep the streets and some to supervise the sweepers. Schoolwork may also include some learning that the students themselves find

useful. This aspect, however, is rigidly subordinated to Capital's most immediate self-interest: working-class discipline. After all, what good to capital is an engineer who speaks Chinese and can solve differential equations if he never shows up for work?

## **Why Schoolwork?**

Most economists agree: "Schoolwork is both a consumption and investment good." So their answer to the question of "why schoolwork?" is that the schooling you get has this marvelous two-sided good about it. Not only do you invest in yourself in such a way that you can expect to get a high paying job in the future but also it is fun! This is a far cry from the days when investment was abstention, but can we take this stuff seriously? Let us consider the "consumption" side. Since by "consumption good" the economists mean something that is enjoyable, pleasurable and satisfying, then anyone calling schooling a consumption good must be kidding. The constant pressure to finish assignments, the hassle of schedules, the stupid sleepless nights to study for exams, and the rest of the selfdisciplining that goes on immediately quells any possible fun. It is like saying that going to prison is a consumption good because it is a pleasure to get out! Surely one might say that there is some enjoyment going on in school, but it isn't education. Rather, it is the struggle against that education that's enjoyable. It is the trips you take to get away from classes, the love affairs that are so distracting, the meandering conversations in bars, the demonstrations that shut it down, the wrong books read and the right books read at the wrong time; all that you do not to be educated.

So on the consumption side, the conclusion is exactly the opposite of the economists. What about the "investment" side? All throughout the sixties economics professors, bankers, "guidance" counselors agreed: school was a good personal investment. The idea was that you should treat yourself like a

little corporation, a mini-GM, so that you could invest in yourself by going to school in the same way a corporation buys machines in order to make a bigger profit operating on the principle: you have to spend money (invest) to make money. If you could raise the money (and the stomach) to go to school either by getting a loan, or working a second job, or getting your parents to pay, you could expect to make a profit on that money because you could expect to get a higher paying job in the future due to your increased schooling. In the heyday of what they called "the human capital revolution," learned economists figured that you would get a better return in investing in your education than if you bought GM stock. This was capitalism for the working class with a vengeance!

Aside from the distaste that this "investment view" might cause—for if you are a corporation then one part of you is going to be a worker and another part of you is going to be the boss over that worker—one might wonder whether you actually get more money from going to school in the long run. In the sixties everyone assured you that you would, but in the "crisis-ridden" seventies all bets are off. The authorities are now saying that their previous analyses were all misconceived, that you cannot expect any such "good return" to your investment in yourself. Not surprisingly it now turns out that you are not a better profit making operation than GM. At best all they can come up with is a possible increase in what they called your "psychic" income, in that if you get more schooling you might land a "nicer" if not a higher paying job; but even this is not guaranteed, especially since all the "nice," "clean" jobs are becoming uncertain, harder to do, and even dangerous, e.g. teaching. It seems that students have been misplanned. It is obvious to every student that this "investment good" attempt to make you see the wisdom of working for free or even paying to work in school is a phoney. So it is getting harder and harder to convince anyone to shell out money for schooling on the basis of the fairy tale of you as profit making corporation. So now both sides of the

economists' claim collapse, but in the midst of this debacle schoolwork gets a new defender from what might seem to be a surprising quarter: the Left. The "socialist" teacher and the "revolutionary" student have become the staunchest defenders of the public university against "budget cut-backs" and the like. Why? Their story goes something like this: education leads to the ability to make more and broader connections in your social situation, in a word, education makes you more conscious. Since the public universities open up the possibility of having a highly educated working class, these universities make it possible for the working class to become more class conscious; further, a more conscious working class will pay less attention to the merely "economistic" demands for more money and less work, and pay more attention to the political task of "building socialism." This logic gives the Left both an explanation of the university crisis— capital is afraid of the highly conscious working class that the university was beginning to spawn—and a demand: more schoolwork and not less! So in the name of political consciousness and socialism these leftists intensify schoolwork (which is just wageless work) and frown upon student demands for less of it as capitalistic backsliding.

At a time when all the usual defenses of the free work done at schools are being exposed, the Left now seizes the time as its chance to lead the working class out of its "materialistic" sleep to its higher mission: the making of socialistic society. But the Left runs afoul of that old question posed to previous enlighteners of the working class: who shall educate the educators? Since the Left does not start from the obvious— schoolwork is unwaged work—all its efforts lead to more unwaged work for capital, to more exploitation. All its attempts to increase class consciousness remain oblivious to capital's control on its own ground, and so the Left ends in consistently supporting capital's efforts to intensify work, in rationalizing and disciplining the working class. So the "building of socialism" becomes just another device for

getting more free work in the service of capital. So capital's and the Left's defense of the wageless character of schoolwork just falls on its face.

## **Students are Unpaid Workers**

Students belong to the working class. More specifically, we belong to that part of the working class that is unwaged (unpaid). Our wagelessness condemns us to lives of poverty, dependence, and overwork. But worst of all, not getting a wage means that we lack the power that the wage provides in dealing with capital. Without the wage we are condemned to lives of bare existence. We are forced to survive on what others wouldn't tolerate. The housing we can afford to rent is substandard and overcrowded. The food we eat, must eat, is cheap institutional food of the cheapest brands. Our clothing and entertainment are standardized and drab. We are a clear case of poverty. Since we are mostly unwaged and since we do have to live, we have to get the money from somewhere else, by being dependent on someone who does receive a wage. For some students, subsistence and tuition are at least partially taken care of by a dear relative. As unwaged students, however, we are in a relationship of dependence upon our parents or other benefactors that leaves us powerless. Further, if a whole family sacrifices—the mother gets a second job and the father sweats to pay for our schooling, our parents are weakened in their struggle against work while we are blackmailed into accepting the school work. Even though we do as much work as the waged, we are made to be dependent upon them; for with the exception of those students who do receive wages (in the Armed Forces, in the “enlightened” Lompoc Jail in California, in private corporation training programs, in Manpower Training) most students get no wage at all for the schoolwork they do. For those of us who do not receive such support, not getting a wage means having to work an additional job outside of school. And since the labor market is saturated with students looking for these jobs, capital imposes minimum wages and benefits on

us. As a result, we work even more hours or even additional jobs. Since our schoolwork is unpaid, most of us work during the so-called summer vacation. Even if we take the time off we have no money with which to enjoy it. The absurdity of this is even further magnified by the very high productivity requirements which are constantly being imposed on us as students (exams, quizzes, papers, etc.) and by the way we are being programmed so that we impose further productivity requirements on ourselves (extra credit work, outside reading and thinking for our classes—not for ourselves, on-the-job training, student teaching, etc.) On the other hand, we are forced to work for nothing and on the other, we are forced to work for almost nothing. Of course, we are told that it will all be made up to us in the future. They say that we will be given this meaningful, high-paying job with a secretary. Our free work will not be in vain. But, as we know even before we joyfully dance out of this factory, there is nothing to look forward to but a very depressing job as hotel clerk in the local Holiday Inn, or, at best, as a secretary at our old workplace within the university. The reality of the situation is one in which today students are already starting to get paid for schoolwork:

- Armed Forces; the ROTC pays \$100 a month plus tuition for studying
- Some corporations pay their employees to attend night school or continue studying towards advanced degrees
- Jailors at the Lompoc Jail are paying some of their prisoners to do schoolwork at the University of California
- Social Security Benefits
- Scholarship recipients (BEOG)
- Vietnam Era veterans

## **Wages for students**

We are fed up with working for free. We demand real money now for the schoolwork we do. We must force capital, which profits

from our work, to pay for our schoolwork. Only then can we stop depending on financial aid, our parents, working second and third jobs, or working during summer vacations for our existence. We already earn a wage; now we must be paid it. Only in this way can we seize more power to use in our dealings with capital. We can do a lot with the money. First, we will have to work less as the "need to work" additional jobs disappears. Second, we will immediately enjoy a higher standard of living since we will have more to spend when we take time off from schoolwork. Third, we will raise the average wage in the entire area affected by the presence of us low-cost workers. By taking time off from schoolwork to demand wages for students, we think and act against the work we are doing. It also puts us in a better position to get the money.

**NO MORE UNPAID SCHOOLWORK!**