

Why unions won't accept Trudeau's wage restraints

A steel worker tells how it feels to be on the threshold of \$10,000 a year, why unions will continue to demand higher wages, and why young workers will be even more militant

I am on the blue-collar workers who after the recent three-month strike, has made the breakthrough into the over \$10,000 a year bracket.

This is certainly a milestone; some people seem to consider it the millennium. It isn't, of course, but for the first time in my life, since the strike, I've gone into debt and been able to buy a 1969 car. Before the strike, I had to be content with a '61 Chev that was in pretty poor shape.

I've got financial security now; before the strike, we were scrimping and nibbling — "I don't think we can afford that." But now we're at least secure, and I could go into debt to buy the car.

It's made a difference for the other people in the plant, too. A lot more people in the shop are making sure their children get a college education.

Ten thousand dollars is a nice round figure — and it sounds wonderful. But things haven't changed a great deal for me. I'm still an hourly paid shift worker, I still work nights and weekends, and I'm still a blue-collar worker.

Five years ago, if I had made \$10,000 a year, perhaps it would have meant more. But it doesn't mean a great deal now. In fact, with the increased deductions from my pay that go to OHSIP, the lamentable Tory doctors' program, larger income tax deductions and the payments on the car, I'm exactly where I was before.

So, in purely financial terms, it has just made things a little easier. In other ways, my life is not going to be changed by making the magic amount of \$10,000. I don't notice any dramatic improvement.

As I'm moving up to \$10,000, others are moving up to \$15,000. I haven't seen any destruction of the class system in this country — it's still there. Teachers and lawyers and doctors are not knocking at my door, saying: "Welcome to our society" — and I'm not knocking on their doors, saying: "Welcome me, I've joined."

As a skilled machinist in a key industry, though, I'm in quite a good position, I suppose. The degree of skill required of me is

as high as anywhere on this continent; I could work with any kind of large machinery. In fact, any industry that has machines and needs service requires men like me.

As a result, since I came to Canada from England in 1952, the only loss of work that I've had has been through strikes; I've never had to seek unemployment relief.

I had a trade — I had something Canada wanted, something to sell. The steel company needs me. I have a skill they can't get along without. If they could get rid of it, they would — it would be cheaper to operate that way.

With automation they've eliminated a lot of the jobs in the steel plant already; horrible jobs they were, too. But some of the people doing those horrible jobs, like scarfing — where a man used to burn off the waste material left on the cooling steel after coming out of the ingots — have been caught short.

The cleaning of the metal is no longer done by a man coated from head to foot in protective material holding a flame-thrower, but automatically. But that man, who used to get \$7 an hour, is now working elsewhere in the plant for less than \$3 an hour.

It happens that I'm in a more secure position than that — but the steel company would abolish my job just as quickly if they could. As it is, I have a skill they need, I work nightshifts and weekends — and I have no compunction about getting \$4.24 an hour for doing it.

In a way, our advances are like going up a wall: We go up one step and slip back two. Every three years, we get a good contract and think "This is fine, at last we've got it made." Then, prices go up.

Since we bought our house 18 years ago for \$9,000, it has nearly tripled in value. There, you've got the whole story of why the working man keeps asking for more: He has to.

And the way the government fixed the last year of our last 3-year contract, we finished up further back than we were ahead. In the last year of our contract, we were entitled to a 1-cent-an-hour increase. In January, just a year ago, Mr. Trudeau



To steelworker Leonard Feasey earning \$10,000 a year means having the financial security to buy a new car on time. It sounds like a lot of money for a blue-collar worker, he says, but with rising taxes and inflation, \$10,000 a year isn't what it used to be. "I'm exactly where I was before."

wisely or unwisely said there would be an increase in taxes up to \$120 in one year. Funny thing: That worked out exactly to what our raise was... and a little more. Instead of an 8-cent-an-hour increase, we lost 2 cents an hour.

And so now Mr. Trudeau and his Prices and Incomes Commission want the union man not to ask for any more wage increases. If Donald MacDonald of the Canadian Labor Congress had gone along with that and said, "In the interests of the Canadian economy, we won't ask for any more money," he would have been assassinated. The working man just would not have stood for it.

Look at the steel industry. The new steel plant at Nanticoke will be the most advanced steel plant on the continent. With 10,000 employees, it will produce 10 million tons of steel a year.

In 1956 there were 7,500 employees here at the Hamilton plant, making approximately 1,000,000 tons of steel a year; now there are 11,500 employees producing over 4,000,000 tons of steel.

Production has gone up 400 per cent, and will more than double

again; personnel has only gone up 50 per cent, and will be reduced in the future — and wages, although they seem to have increased, haven't kept up with inflation and taxes, let alone with the company's profits.

I don't know too much about economics, except what hits the folding money in my pocket. But I know this much: The younger generation that is coming to work now won't put up with the kind of thing that people my age have put up with. I admire them; they ask questions. Tough questions like: "Why am I doing this?"

I was a product of the Depression, and I was glad to get a job — I never asked questions. I'm only asking questions today, at 55, that these young people are asking from the start.

One of the first things they ask me is: "Look, you're 55. You're working shifts and weekends. So your getting four bucks an hour — what's in it for you? Then what?"

It's not like me to worry about these things. I don't think I can change them. But these younger people — their sense of values is different.

They don't like being an extension of a computer — which most of us are in the steel plant, and will be even more from now on. They are a lot more anti-Establishment than we ever were — and I always thought I was militant.

Take the incident at Sir George Williams University, where the kids broke the computer. I was as shocked as anybody when it happened — but I thought about it, and I could see that in a way it was history repeating itself. Remember Arkwright's Spinning Jenny, and the Luddites who destroyed the machines in England? They were both expressing their contempt of machines that posed the threat of controlling their lives.

**Leonard FEASEY
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Leonard Feasey is a 55-year-old Hamilton machinist who works for the Steel Company of Canada. After a three-month strike last fall, his union negotiated a contract which next year will give him an income of \$10,000 a year. He comments here on the government's request that unions call a halt to further wage demands.

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