

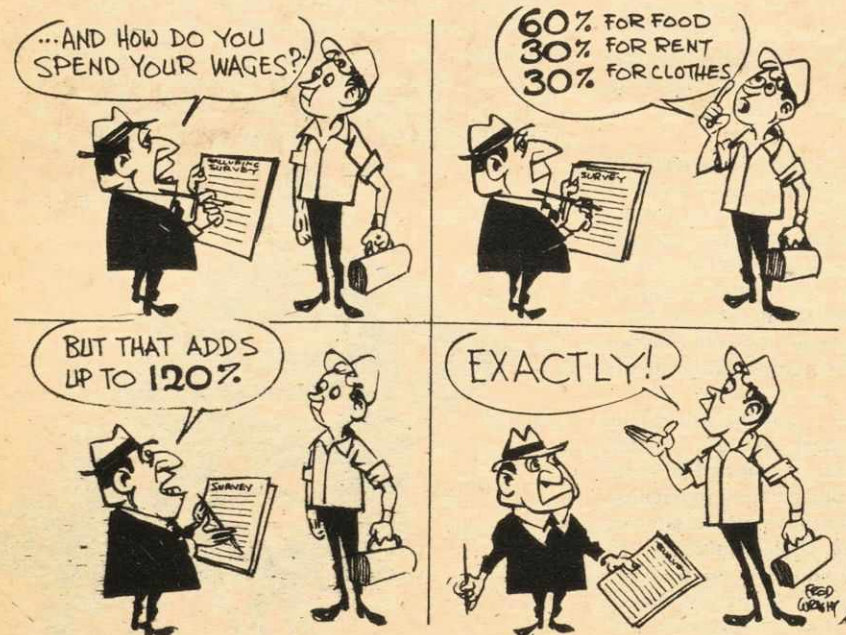
Higher learning Lower wages

by Geoff Clare and Rick Plociennik

Fred and John are fictitious names for two Dalhousie maintenance workers who are members of CUPE local No. 1392. Both men would have preferred to use their real names but, as Fred told us, "At Dalhousie if they don't like you very much they can get rid of you ... one way or another."

Last fall, their Union (which includes the over 250 cleaners and grounds crew at the University) experienced an unjust wage rollback of over 15% on their 1975-76 contract with the university. The consequences: below poverty-line wages for many, repayments to Dalhousie of hundreds of dollars per worker, poorer contract settlements in the years to come.

Just after the Federal Anti-Inflation Board made their ruling, we visited Fred's home in North End Halifax and talked with Fred, his wife Susan, and John, a fellow worker at Dal. In a very informal chat, we talked about what it is like to work at Dalhousie, and what impact the recent A.I.B. ruling had on their lives. Both men have worked at Dal for more than five years, and both are married. Fred has four children; John has two with one on the way.



How much do you earn at Dalhousie?

John: I take home \$240 every two weeks. That's about \$4.05 an hour — Christ knows what it's going to be after this rollback.

Fred: Right now I earn the same as John, which amounts to about \$8,000 for the year...not very much to support a wife and four kids.

Do you have any other jobs?

John: Yeah, I work part time in the evenings as a cleaner. I needed the second job so I can live. I put in thirty hours a week down there and forty hours a week at Dal — a good seventy hours a week. I've been doing it for four years. It's not easy, you get use to it, but it's not easy.

Fred: Most of us are forced to take two jobs to hold up our obligations. I have to have a part-time job to pay my bills and live on. We're not making as much in the university as we should make, Dalhousie has never paid a living wage since I started there.

I leave here at 7:00 in the morning and usually don't get home 'till 11:00 at night, five days a week...not much of a family life, eh? But without that extra money I can't survive, can't pay my bills.

John: That's right. I couldn't make ends meet with one job. Since we had our raise in January, we were just getting settled. Maybe in another year or so I could have given up the part-time job. But now with the rollback it might be another ten years before I can give it up. If I lose either of them, I'll be finished. The next step would be bankruptcy.

Why does Dalhousie pay you so poorly?

Fred: I don't know. Back in 1970 I made \$1.84 per hour and at the same time city cleaners doing the same work were making \$3.30. They say they don't have enough money to pay us a living wage, but they usually find the money to buy houses and pay administrators \$25,000 a year. We'd be better off on welfare than working for Dal.

It's not only us that's getting ripped off — look at some of the secretaries making \$5,000 a year...that's no money.

What bills do you have?

Fred: I'll tell you, they aren't luxury bills. It's finance bills that hurt the most after we buy stuff at Christmas for the kids. And if something goes wrong with the house I've got to go to the finance company to borrow some more.

On top of that I've got phone bills, light bills and heat bills...which is a big problem. It cost me \$900 to heat this place last winter. Three times we ran out of fuel and had to move in with the relatives — we didn't have the cash.

John: I owe few bills, and they're a sizeable amount. Loans on stuff you like to have, and you like to have it now and not later. So you pay on it through your teeth. I don't own a home, probably never will. I don't think I could make it if I wasn't living with the wife's parents. I pay them part of the rent. If I had to pay my bills, pay rent, oil, electricity, and everything else that goes with living today, I couldn't do it. But where I am now, some day I've got to face the fact that I've got to get out and live on my own. It's going to be pretty tough. We're just hanging by a thread right now.

What did you think of your last contract?

Fred: We had to fight like hell for a half decent wage and since that time they've cut back the working staff by 35%. In the end what they gave us was a little more money and twice as much work. We paid a penalty for making half decent earnings.

Susan: When they signed that contract we thought for the first time that we would get ahead. We need a new fridge...now with the rollback we'll have to go to the finance company again. Finance companies rip you off, but where else can you go for money?

John: You know, with that raise it was almost like heaven. But with this rollback, well, usually you figure getting a raise one year and another the next. You don't figure on going down the ladder again the year after.

What was your reaction to the rollback?

John: Well, I suppose you just have to take what comes. It bothers me a great deal and I think about it a lot, but what can I do.

Fred: I was dumbfounded. Trudeau claimed that poor people weren't going to get hit by the A.I.B. He lied!

Susan: If Fred is cut back \$3.50 an hour we just can't survive, not with the lights, fuel, and groceries going up...and we can't even afford a car. We wanted one badly this year, but there was no way we could make it. Not even a second hand one.

John: It makes you cut back on everything. You just do. Now if I lose 50c an hour off my pay, there's \$4 a day, \$20 a week, \$80 a month. You know, there's a lot of uncertainty about what to do. Might have to go out and get a third job. I've been thinking about it seriously — a couple of hours a week, anything I can get will help.

My wife says she'll get a job after the baby comes along, but then you have to have someone to look after the kids, and pay them. It always seems like you're paying out more than what's coming in.

Susan: Well, I said that if Fred got rolled back I'd have to take Peter out of school and put him to work...he's only 15 and I hate to do it but we're going to have to...he'll miss a whole year of school, maybe more...it isn't fair, but what can we do?

What if Dalhousie orders you to pay back, say \$400?

John: I won't be able to pay them back this week, and not the week after, either. Weekly deductions will be hard, too. I can't say anything about it if they say I got to pay them back. I'm not in a position to say no to them...I need this job, so I got to go along with what they say. \$400 doesn't sound like too much, but we just don't have that kind of money, especially to give back to Dal.

Susan: If they do that then we'll die. I'll tell you right now I wouldn't know where it would come from. They might as well tell us to starve to death because Fred is killing himself as it is. Instead of a part-time job he'll have to get another full-time job.

John: Well, when we die the city will always bury us.



What do you think about the A.I.B.?

Susan: Trudeau is trying to break the back of unions. He's telling them that they don't have any rights now. Is that democratic? If this goes on labour is going to have to take the biggest fight they have ever had. Not just one day, but longer...a lot longer.

Fred: Lights go up 65%, groceries are going sky-high and yet they tell us that we're only allowed 6% in the next contract. In a free country people are telling us what we should earn for our labour...Under the A.I.B. the rich'll get richer and the poor'll get poorer. I'm sure of that.

What do you think of Dal's reaction to the rollback?

Fred: Personally, I didn't believe Hicks when he said he was concerned about the rollback. If Dalhousie was any kind of management at all they would stick up for our rights. But based on past history we know better than that.

Susan: If anyone puts down on paper what Dalhousie is making on this rollback—they're laughing. As far as I'm concerned, the A.I.B. is doing Dal's dirty work for them. They're going to save thousands of dollars on the backs of the poor.

What does the future hold for you?

John: You get awful depressed at times. We get depressed at this, somebody gets depressed at something else. You can't win, but we're going to try.

Fred: John's right. The future doesn't look very good now. I'll tell you, with Christmas only two months away, I'll have to go to the finance company again, and I can't afford to do that, that will put me deeper in the hole. I don't know what's going to happen.

Susan: They're telling us to do the impossible, but we can't...there's no way. What's the sense of working hard when you don't get anywhere for it? They are going to push poor people so far and then they'll have a war on their hands.

Fred: That's true — I've been fighting ever since I was a small boy; first in the war, and now against my own government. It doesn't seem right.

I know that my children will have to continue the fight...they will have to be a strong generation...I often wonder about their future.

(Geoff Clare is a history student at Dalhousie University. Rick Plociennik is a student at Dalhousie and a member of the Nova Scotia Labour Research and Support Centre.)