

Comment

Comment is an opinion column open to members of the university community who wish to present an informed opinion on a topic of their selection.

Capitalism causes poverty and inequality

by Geoff Clare

Working Canadians' living standards have quickly become eroded by strangling price increases. This coupled with rising unemployment, has led many to question the legitimacy of our social structure. In the midst of this current economic crisis, and with no end in sight, people are asking, "Where are we going? What's wrong?"

Now, at some point or another we've all been taught that with capitalism we've achieved "the most efficient system in human history...the apex in social organization". But these same ideas, pumped into our heads like a sacred catechism, contradict the hard realities of life. Because instead of efficiency we see everywhere inefficiency; instead of organization, disorganization; we've achieved a social system which creates poverty and inequality in the midst of wealth. People are naturally starting to question their basic assumptions.

This questioning has now reached the point where those who stand at the heights of the economic and political institutions in our society feel compelled to provide answers. Their motive is simple -- defense of the system.

What are they feeding us? An undigestible diet of scapegoat theories like, "Inflation is caused by international inflationary pressures beyond our control", or "Wage increases are the source of price increases" or "Unemployment is caused by those damned immigrants taking your jobs".

You've seen the ad: "Let's free enterprise". It's part of a nationwide campaign to make people believe that the private market system works in the public interest.

Witness last week's ad in the *Gazette*, sponsored by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. An organization "dedicated to the preservation of free competitive enterprise", their message comes across loud and clear. Their ad, titled "WAKE UP CANADA.... there's no free lunch", attacks a number of social security benefits that Canadian working people have fought for and won over the last 60 years. The implication is that the unemployed and welfare recipients are freeloaders who are ripping-off the system. The assumption is that people would rather receive social assistance than work; that they like it living at the poverty level and that they like being underhoused, underclothed, and underfed. The ad insinuates that if this 'riff-raff' would clean up their act the system would work perfectly.

Those who propagate this myth neatly attempt to blame the ills of our society on the very people who are the most devastated victims of our society's failure. The result has been slashed budgets on the very

programmes that least need financial cutback. And people have suffered.

Another spokesman for this campaign is Roderique Billodeau, President of the Canadian Manufacturers Association, who spoke at Dal last Thursday. Mr. Billodeau's visit was one in a series of "fireside chats" with Canadian students in an attempt to improve the battered image of business in the country.

Mr. Billodeau told the audience that he was troubled by the present reputation of businessmen as cold, calculating men whose only concern was making money through profit maximization. He said that big businessmen like himself only want to be known as ordinary Canadians who are having tough times "like anyone else" in these inflationary days. With emotion which brought the McInnis Room to a hushed standstill, the only sound the wiping away of the odd spontaneous tear, Mr. Billodeau told how he "so badly wanted to buy an airplane but just couldn't find the cash." While some in the audience probably found it hard to control their urge to pass a collection plate for the unfortunate man, for others the moral of the story was plain: While most Canadians measure hard times in the loss of life's necessities, for the big businessman the only way of calculating "poverty" is by the number of expensive toys they can't afford.

When Billodeau completed his introductory remarks he was questioned by a panel of six students on local, national, and world problems. Predictably, his answers on issues of unemployment, income disparity and world underdevelopment reflected the very cold, calculating image that he was attempting to erase. For example, he proposed that to solve Nova Scotia's economic difficulties, "some unemployed Nova Scotians ought to be forced to move elsewhere in Canada to get jobs." He added "The minimum wage should be pared 30 per cent...a reduction in the minimum wage would give employers the opportunity to set wages."

In the end, he only confirmed his own motivation of self-interest and greed; men like Billodeau care no more about human problems than Trudeau does about price increases, or Gerald Regan does about Cape Breton's unemployed.

Mr. Billodeau also talked about the CMA's campaign to salvage what he called the free enterprise system in Canada. Except now, the period of free enterprise capitalism, as he knows, has long past. More accurately, we now live in an era of monopoly capitalism, characterized by a few companies controlling the markets and pricing in our major industries. A consequence has been the centralization of economic and political power in the hands of a few individuals like Mr. Billodeau who

actively collude to discourage competition.

Take an example that affects Dalhousie. Halifax-Metro Credit Union Limited is being forced out of its office on the corner of Coburg and Henry Streets. It wanted to

move into an office in the LeMarchant Towers, behind the Bank of Commerce located there. The credit union made a deposit on the rent but had to wait for the Bank of Commerce to say it was OK. You continued on page 6

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