

A Day at the Table

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The employer's bargaining team marches into the room single file dressed in suits. They like to let us know that there is more between us than just a table. Five white men and one white woman, led by a fancy Bay Street lawyer, who makes more in a day of bargaining with us than TAs make in a month. When he speaks, he prefers not to address women or people of colour; and when he has to, his tone is noticeably different. He takes every opportunity he can to assert the power and entitlement he believes he holds.

There are no lawyers on our side. We represent ourselves. Normally, we sit across from them in jeans and t-shirts – the differences obvious to all. Today is special though – our Chief Negotiator, Graham, is wearing a pink tank top and pink cowboy hat. We're not going to present our proposals meekly and wait for the usual 'not inclined'. Today the tables are turned and we're answering back.

Camera flashes are going off in their faces. With wide eyes, the members of the employer's bargaining team take stalk of the room. Roughly thirty rank-and-file members are crowded around our side waving signs and banners. As I begin to speak, I notice the effort Barry Miller is making not to stare at Graham's pink cowboy hat. I begin to present our wage demands, "Are they really so unreasonable?" I ask them to consider the demands in a different context. "For us, our wage demand isn't about a percent increase. It's about bringing our members to poverty line wages."

The employer says nothing. They continue to look down and shift papers around. Likely they are not convinced. They sit there in their expensive suits and listen to me talk about members piling up credit card debt to make it through the summer, and trying to find enough money to pay for grocery bills and rent. I want them to think about their own position in the performance we are acting out; challenge them to question what right they have to deny us the bare essentials of life.

I hand out a document. It slowly makes its way around the room. It has the names and salaries of the four faculty members of their team as well as their wage increases in the past year.¹ I read out the names one by one and the generous bonuses they received last year.

Name	2007	2008	Change	Increase
Robert Drummond	\$157,156.74	\$181,609	+\$24,452.26	15.6%
Harvey Skinner	\$130,961.15 (UofI)	\$278,633 (York)	+\$147,671.85	112.7%
Asia Weiss	\$104,826.36	\$126,051	+\$21,224.64	20.2%
Barry Miller	\$140,095.42	\$150,348	+\$10,252.58	7.3%

Union members around the room are laughing and talking amongst themselves about the document. No one on the other side of the table will make eye contact with me. “It’s too bad Dean Drummond isn’t here,” I think. “I wonder if he knows how much more Dean Skinner makes than he does!” I return to the presentation. “The Low-Income Cut Off, Statistics Canada’s measurement of a poverty-line wage for 1 person in a city over 500,000, was \$21,666 in 2007,” I note.² “Of course, that assumes graduate students don’t have partners or dependents and ignores the fact that they have already completed at least one degree.” People around the room are nodding, but I’m met with more silence from the other side of the room.

“Not only are we being asked to live on less than poverty wages, but many of us are looking at six or more additional years of studies – years of adding to the average \$22,700 debt undergraduates in Ontario are now graduating with.³ We sink deeper and deeper into debt while the salaries of our employers grow and grow.” They are visibly uncomfortable as I end to a round of applause, but like Graham’s attire, my speech means more to us than it does to them.

¹ Available from the Government of Ontario at - <http://www.fin.gov.on.ca/english/publications/salarydisclosure/>.

² Statistics Canada - <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/75F0002MIE/75F0002MIE2008004.pdf>.

³ The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance - <http://www.ousa.on.ca/sef/page/id/41.html>.

Problématique #12

As our team continues to present and demand responses, their lawyer looks down, shuffling papers and doing his best to say as little as possible. He'd rather not say no to us in front of the crowd, so for today he just meekly comments, "We have no more responses at this time." This is the same response we get when we ask for their position on wages, tuition, job security, class size, and employment equity. When we're finally done, the employer's team leaves the room quietly. I'm left wondering if they heard a word of it. Months later, the unhappy feeling has yet to go away.