

Punch On Punch Off
by Geoff Goodfellow

Introduction

This guide complements the study of ***Punch On Punch Off*** by Geoff Goodfellow, for Senior Secondary, VET and Adult students.

Punch On Punch Off is a powerful, often confronting book about what it feels like to be a worker, both blue and white collar, and the impact the workplace can have on workers and their families.

The guide offers a range of activities and information to help students form a deeper understanding of some of the issues raised in the collection of poems.

Punch On Punch Off aims to alert students to some of the potentially hazardous, inequitable conditions of the workplace.

It also celebrates the rich cultural diversity that exists in the Australian workforce and challenges students to delve more closely into where this all began.

Eight poems have been chosen to work with:

1. [What Mum Told Me in 1964](#)
 2. [The Violence of Work](#)
 3. [Turning in Circles](#)
 4. [Changing the Image](#)
 5. [Respecting Limits](#)
 6. [The Grind](#)
 7. [The Luxury of Work](#)
 8. [On a Roll](#)
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1. What Mum Told Me in 1964

This is a poem about the brutality of hard, physical work.

1964; before most students reading these words were born, and Geoff was 15 and leaving school to join the workforce. Like Geoff, many young people took this option rather than pursuing further education. There were more jobs around and less focus on qualifications. Now, 40 years later, students have to deal with the ever-increasing pressures to stay at school in order to compete with their peers in the job market.

Geoff begins the poem with his mother's stoic words,

hard work never killed anyone

reflecting the work ethic, particularly of the working class of the time.

We then discover the agony that resulted from this 'hard work' as Geoff tells us of his debilitating back injury. Alarming, the same injury is repeated in other members of Geoff's family for similar reasons.

Geoff expresses his frustration in a relentless list of different practitioners he visited in an attempt to ease the pain, but in the end calls them all,

a range of freaks who took my money

He finally 'finds his smile again' after treatment by a manipulative physiotherapist. However, Geoff never returned to hard, physical work again, choosing instead to wield a pen.

Geoff's mother's words did not take into account the fact that serious injury can destroy a person's quality of life, through not only having to live with constant pain but having to cope with a shortened working life.



Geoff, c.1965



Geoff, c.1978

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Research the employment situation in the early 60s in Australia.
 - a) Compare it with today.
- 2) What is OHS [Occupational Health and Safety]?
 - a) Try the ACTU website www.actu.asn.au and www.worksite.actu.asn.au, the specific schools site.
- 3) The poem addresses safety issues in jobs which require hard work and heavy lifting. Find out what OHS standards exist in these types of jobs. How could they be improved?
- 4) There is a lack of understanding among young workers that they can do something if they experience an injury while on the job.
 - a) What is a Union? List some examples.
 - b) see www.actu.asn.au | www.utlc.org.au [SA unions] | www.vthc.org.au [Victorian Trades Hall site] good for history of unions, general worker info and how to join a union | www.council.labor.net.au [NSW Labor Council site] 'Ask Neal' a specially designed question and answer feature for workplace issues.
 - c) How can Unions assist workers who suffer injury because of their job?
 - d) see 'U...who?' YOUNG WORKERS LEGAL SERVICE www.utlc.org.au/youth —here are some more young workers' sites: www.uthc.org.au.young_people | www.union.org.nz/yum
- 5) Research Workers' Compensation.
 - a) Present a PowerPoint or produce a written report on the topic.
 - b) see Workcover SA and Worksafe Australia
- 6) Explain the line,

young men are always invincible
- 7) Can you think of any examples of this, maybe from your own or friends' experience?
- 8) Find out about different forms of rehabilitation.
- 9) Do you know anyone who has suffered an injury at work? Try to tell their story. Ask them to help you if they don't mind. Then either write it down or share it in a group. Perhaps you could write a poem.
- 10) Which lines in Geoff's poem indicate the depression that a severe injury can cause?
- 11) Look at workplace safety standards in other countries. Try to find some examples eg. construction during the Olympic Games in Greece.

Modelling

I have written a poem about my father, Len James, a canvas worker who was blinded in one eye because of a work injury. Here it is,

Pirate

*I would sit waiting
in the green Holden ute
loving the smell
of the canvas
tipping the wooden spirit level
back
and forth
waiting for dad
to finish his quote*

*what's a quote?
I'd ask*

*I measure
I quote the price
I make the blind
then I nail it to the window*

*so that's why you're blind
dad?*

*dad looks at me
with his one good eye
the other milky white*

*yeah,
copped a piece of steel
flew right in my eye
hardly felt it
but it stayed there
rusting
till the doctors
took it out
and my sight with it*

*I learnt never to
jump out at dad
or play tricks
on his blind side*

*I didn't mind
I had my own real
pirate*



Above: Len James' work van

2. The Violence of Work

This poem, like the previous, tells of the brutality of the workplace, but the brutality is more subtle, yet just as savage.

It describes the monotony of many 'unskilled' jobs; process workers, factory hands, machinery operators. Geoff shows us how this monotony, combined with feelings of powerlessness, alienation and frustration can lead to domestic violence.

The repetitive nature of this type of work is conveyed by the repetition of the lines,

*Monday to Friday
punch on punch off*

After each verse, like a plaintive chorus.

The words are relentless just like the rhythm throughout the poem. You can almost hear the regular beat of the machinery in the background.

The tone of the poem is robot-like, each verse beginning in the same way,

I'm told to work faster

We feel his isolation, he is not interacting with a group,

I have smoko with Billy

This isolation is reinforced by the line,

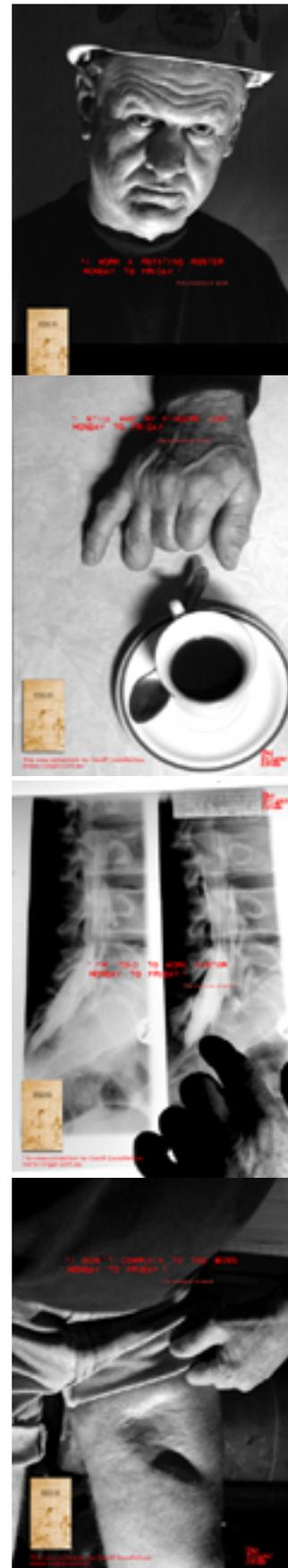
I play euchre at lunchtime

Euchre is a non-verbal activity, requiring no significant interaction.

*I still had my fingers last
Monday to Friday*

These lines tell of a worker who has lost his fingers in a work accident.

Geoff also expresses the worker's helplessness and perhaps his acceptance of the situation,



*I just do my best
I don't complain to the boss*

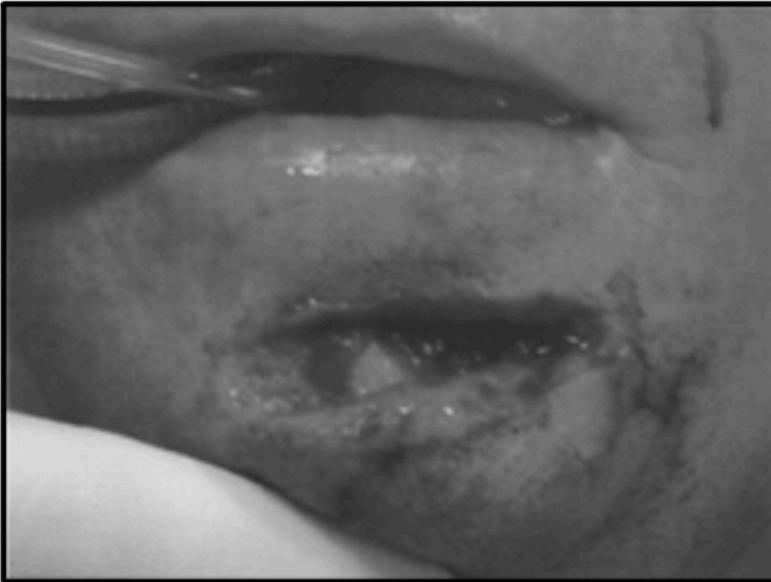
The rhythm and tone only break at the end of the poem when Geoff changes from

*punch on punch off to
want to punch on punch on*

The worker takes his boredom, frustration and feelings of low self-esteem home to his partner. The message here is that home is the only place he feels he has any power, any control over his life. Unfortunately, this has a devastating effect, with him resorting to violence while his partner and possibly children become unwitting victims of **The Violence of Work**.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) What is a 'rotating roster'?
 - a) What is a 'tally'?
 - b) What does 'I'm paid the award' mean?
- 2) Which line in the poem tells you of the potential hazards of the job?
- 3) Research Domestic Violence. How serious a problem is it in our society? Present a report to the class.
- 4) Read 'Poem for Annie' in **Bow Tie & Tails**.
 - a) This is a poem Geoff wrote about his sister, Annie, herself a victim of domestic violence. Write your response to the poem or discuss it in a group.
- 5) What is 'the cycle of violence'?
 - a) What can be done to help those affected?
 - b) see Women's Information Service www.wis.sa.gov.au
- 6) Do you know anyone who has experienced the effects of domestic violence? Can you write down their story or share it with the group. Make sure it's ok with the person you are writing about first.
- 7) The workers Geoff talks about in 'The Violence of Work' all experience dissatisfaction in their workplace. Can you make any suggestions that would improve their conditions and relieve the boredom, repetition, lack of control, isolation, pressure, hazards? Could workers make use of their unions to assist?



Sometimes workplace violence is particularly direct. Geoff's brother Brian suffered horrific facial injuries as a result of a workplace accident



3. Turning in Circles

Australia is a country rich in cultural diversity. Apart from the original inhabitants of this land, the Aboriginal people, our ancestors all came from 'somewhere else' many from England, Scotland and Ireland, the original 'boat people'. In this poem Geoff celebrates the contribution made to this country by the 'new Australians', migrants and refugees from many different lands,

*In the 1950s
when the doors crept open*

The deliberate use of the word 'crept' conveys the hesitancy, the fear behind the first waves of migration. These were the dark days of the White Australia Policy when the Government got to pick and choose whom they allowed into the country, mainly on the basis of colour, their colour — white



Source: Western Region Poster Project, Victoria

Geoff underscores the bitter irony that Aboriginal Australians 'old Australians' were not even counted as part of our population until 1967. He goes on to acknowledge the invaluable work done by migrants in post-war industry in Australia. He also acknowledges the racism these people had to put up with:

bogs, wogs & dagoes

But again, the irony, newcomers to the country were given jobs but not our 'old Australians',

blacks were still discriminated against

Geoff then lists people from his neighbourhood, Semaphore, and beyond, who came from 'somewhere else'. I'm sure we could all make similar lists. Finally he hits us with the ultimate irony,

*a nation full of wogs & bogs & dagoes
& boat people of all persuasions
are scared by a container full of wogs*

Referring to the Tampa refugee incident. Why, Geoff asks, do we feel so threatened by these newcomers when we are all newcomers?

Geoff ends the poem with a dig at both political parties saying their response to the incident was to,

*turn in circles
in concentric circles*

in other words, their response went nowhere because their real priority was to court public favour. Has much changed since then?

[click here to see material on the White Australia Policy](#)

ACTIVITIES

- 1) What was the Snowy Mountains Scheme?
 - a) Do a research assignment on the scheme and present to the group.
- 2) What are 'hands and feet industries'?
 - a) List the ones mentioned in the poem.
 - b) Why are these jobs often filled by migrant labour?
- 3) What are some of the barriers that migrants face in gaining employment?
- 4) Racist language is ugly language. Do you hear it in the schoolyard, workplace or at home? Is it ever directed at you? Share your stories.
 - a) Find out what the law says about using racist language and discriminating against someone because of their race, particularly in the job market,
 - b) see Racism. No Way! www.racism.noway.com.au
 - c) Equal Opportunity commission of SA www.eoc.sa.gov.au
 - d) Celebrating Diversity Coalition www.cdc.org.au
 - e) United Nations World Conference Against Racism www.un.org/WCAR
 - f) Human rights and Equal Opportunity Commission www.hreoc.gov.au
- 5) What is the difference between a migrant, a refugee and an asylum seeker?
 - a) see 'Face the Facts' produced by Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Access online at: www.humanrights.gov.au/racial_discrimination/face_facts
 - b) Refugee Council of Australia www.refugeecouncil.org.au
 - c) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees www.unhcr.ch
 - d) Amnesty International www.amnesty.org.au
 - e) Department of Immigration & Multicultural & Indigenous Affairs www.dimia.gov.au
 - f) Refugees Australia www.refugeesaustralia.org
- 6) Consider the inherent racism in the intolerant attitude of government as well as many people in the community in regards to the refugee situation.
 - a) Think of the language used: 'queue jumpers', 'Asians out!'

- 7) Organise a debate; SHOULD AUSTRALIA ALLOW IN MORE REFUGEES?
- 8) What is the Equal Opportunity Act?
 - a) see Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia
- 9) Find out what avenues exist for people who feel they are being discriminated against. What is the Racial Discrimination Act?
 - a) see Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission website.
- 10) What is a census?
- 11) Make a list of foods, drinks and customs that have come to Australia from other cultures since the 1950s,

the humble Lebanese cucumber

- 12) was virtually unknown and rarely seen at the greengrocer, now there is a vast array of fruit and vegetables, breads, pasta as well as cooking utensils. Kangaroo steak and 'bush tucker' have now become trendy, high class restaurant dishes.
- 13) Find out what most 'white Australians' ate and drank before the influx of migrants to this country. Which would you prefer?
- 14) How many different cultural groups are there in Australia?
 - a) List them.
 - b) You might like to choose one to do a research assignment on and present as a PowerPoint. See Australian Bureau of Statistics www.abs.gov.au
- 15) What do all these cultures bring to ours?
- 16) Make a list of people you know at school or in your neighbourhood or workplace who are from a different cultural background to yours. If they work what is their occupation?
- 17) Research the White Australia Policy.
- 18) What is a 'tariff'?
 - a) Explain the line,

till tariffs took their toll

- 19) How does the removal of tariffs affect employment levels?
 - a) Find some examples from current times.



Workers on a drilling jumbo inside a tunnel in the Snowy Mountains

4. Changing the Image

This poem is written from a female worker's perspective. The entire poem is in italics indicating that Geoff is using the voice of the young woman who has chosen to be apprenticed on a building site. In so doing she has gone against the stereotypical image for girls and chosen a trade.

Working in an all-male environment she experiences a degree of sexual harassment,

*I'm no Barbie doll
but I do get whistled
on the job*

The men are not used to seeing a woman on their territory doing the same job. Are they just teasing or are they a little confronted? Are they out of their comfort zone?

The young apprentice decides to retaliate by challenging the men's stereotypes even further. She posts a male centrefold in the lunchroom thereby asserting herself as an equal, and they leave her alone.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Research women in non-typical careers.
 - a) Choose one to write a report about.
- 2) Research sexual harassment in the workplace.
 - a) What are the laws?
 - b) What can an employee do if he/she is being sexually harassed?
 - c) by a fellow employee
 - d) by an employer
 - e) see www.eoc.sa.gov.au [SA equal opportunity site] and www.humanrights.gov.au/youthchallenge the federal human rights commission website link for young people. A great site for young people interested in human rights.
- 3) Why do some female workers not report incidents of sexual harassment?
- 4) Is there equity in the job market?
 - a) Do females get equal pay with men?
 - b) Do employees think twice before employing a young female?
 - c) Think of some reasons.
- 5) What is an apprenticeship?
 - a) see www.workskil.com.au
 - b) www.grouptraining.com.au
- 6) What is a traineeship?
- 7) Do girls get teased at school if they talk about entering male dominated fields?
 - a) Survey your friends.

5. Respecting Limits

This again is a poem about the savagery of work and the different ways workers deal with the trauma of a serious work accident.

Geoff takes us outside the oil refinery fence where the maintenance crew gather in solidarity every Friday afternoon for two hours,

*& though it's knock-off time
no-one's going home*

He tells us that they perform this ritual to remind themselves and the boss, of the dangers inherent in the job and to pay their respects to the men who were injured or lost their lives in the

steamball of boiling oil

They don't take their 'beer & bundies' protest over the top, they 'respect their limits'. They don't need to crash through the boss's mirrored windows for him to get the message. They're drowning memories but at the same time keeping them alive and strong.

Geoff then tells us the shop steward's story, how he was first on the scene of the accident and how he is still trying to deal with the trauma.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) This accident occurred at the Mobil Pt Stanvac Oil Refinery in South Australia.
 - a) Is the refinery still in operation?
- 2) What is an oil refinery? What work happens there? Why is the work so dangerous?
- 3) How many oil refineries are there in Australia?
- 4) Which country is the largest oil producer in the world?
- 5) Life-threatening experiences can cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD]. The shop steward, having witnessed the horrific scene, is exhibiting many of the symptoms of PTSD:

**Images from the Picket Line:
Mobil 1994 (middle and top) and
Raven Products 1993 (bottom)**



- a) nightmares, difficulty sleeping
- b) flashbacks
- c) difficulties with relationships [often family]
- d) feelings of vulnerability
- e) fear of dying

*he still can't escape
the recurring nightmare*

*flat out holding
himself together*

- 6) Find out as much as you can about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- 7) What exists in the form of compensation for workers who experience PTSD?
- 8) Consider another group of workers; army, navy, air force.
 - a) Do you think people who work in these jobs may suffer PTSD, not to mention civilians caught up in wars! Discuss with your group.
- 9) Also see Geoff's poem '**Mirror to my Childhood**' in **Poems for a Dead Father**. Write your own response to this poem. What does it tell you about PTSD and the effects on the person and their family?
- 10) Sometimes people with PTSD try to blot out the painful memories by 'self-medicating'; drinking, taking drugs etc.

*drowning memories
with beer & bundies*

- 11) Do you think this is a real solution? What else can they do? Where can people go to get help?
 - 12) Being part of a Union can be a way for workers to feel a sense of belonging in an environment which is often alienating, harsh and dangerous.
 - a) Discuss in your group.
 - 13) What job does a shop steward do?**
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6. The Grind

The young woman Geoff describes in this portrait poem chooses to invent a more exotic, interesting profession as she feels stuck in 'the grind'.

A young, single mother on a pension, she works 3 jobs just to make ends meet:

*baker's assistant
cake decorator
checkout chick*

But she sometimes claims to those who don't know her, to work for a funeral director, 'embalming corpses'; sure to get a reaction!

Geoff paints a mischievous picture of her early on in the poem with lines like these:

*bright sparkling eyes
cheeky grin
little piggy tails*

But later he reveals a darker, more troubled side of this young woman. She has done it tough and continues to battle every day, never knowing if she can pay the bills, always feeling the pressure of time and responsibility.

She lies about her job to cover her self-consciousness about her lack of education and social status.

She is proud of her 'working class credentials' despising,

*the stockbroker types
& their blatant greed & disregard
for anyone other than themselves*

These are values that are unfamiliar to her and the way she was brought up.

So, the mischief comes out again as she,

revs them up

with her graphic fantasy stories from the funeral parlour.

Geoff speaks of her,

mounting mobile phone bill

raising the issue that, even though she has little money, she has to have a mobile phone in order to be 'on tap' 24 hours, in case shifts are changed.

And her car is a constant pressure too; it is not in good working order,
but she needs it for work as she does 3am shifts, so public transport is not an option,

*listening for her disc pads to grind
to a halt
wondering aloud if she can get another week
out of them*

*knowing that another car payment
is already overdue
& the insurance is less
than a week away*

*& that the tyres are just about
as worn down as she feels after yet
another early start*

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Notice the structure of the poem. Geoff has made it a bit like a puzzle. You are not sure who this young woman really is for a while. Truth and lies are mixed up.
 - a) Why has Geoff used this technique?
- 2) What is a 'porky pie'?
 - a) Make a list of some more examples of rhyming slang.
 - b) Where did it come from?
- 3) What is anorexia?
 - a) Who is subjected to it?
 - b) Is it just a female problem?
 - c) Research and discuss.
- 4) What type of pension do you think she was getting?
 - a) Research pensions and produce a PowerPoint or give a talk to the group.
- 5) It is a hard life for single working parents.
 - a) Research childcare and out of school hours care.
 - b) How have these services changed over the last 20 years?
 - c) What services are available and how affordable are they?
- 6) Is enough being done for working parents?
Find out the government's policy on:
 - a) childcare
 - b) maternity/accouchement leave
 - c) parenting leave
- 7) You might like to try to write a poem about someone you know who has to battle to go to work, pay the bills and bring up the kids on his/her own.
- 8) Do you think it's fair that a young worker has to have a mobile phone even if he/she can't afford to meet the payments, or is there a fairer way a boss could arrange shifts? Discuss.

- 9) Geoff again brings in the issue of the savagery of work, a theme which runs right through **Punch On Punch Off**.
- a) He tells us about the young apprentice plumber who died tragically while on the job. He tells how the accident was reported in the morning paper,

*in an article not much bigger
than a cigarette packet*

- 10) Why does such a tragic event attract less media attention than a car accident?
- 11) How old was the young apprentice plumber?
- a) What clue does Geoff give?
- 12) Research the incidence of accidental death in the workplace.
- a) see www.workcover.com/learning, a site about injuries and deaths at work and safety issues.
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7. The Luxury of Work

This is another poem from a female worker's perspective, this time a 'shop girl'. It is all in her 'voice', indicated by the use of italics throughout.

It's an angry poem, anger over the inequality she sees between her and the shop owner. There is resentment too,

*you get paid ten dollars an hour
& asked to stay on the dole
while they drive flash cars
& their shop girls ride bikes*

She tells us she is not allowed to take breaks; to go to the toilet or if feeling unwell or upset, sometimes even having to go without lunch because of time restrictions or lack of money due to low rates of casual pay,

*sometimes it's hard even
getting some lunch
unless you take it with you—
& most times you're living so day-to-day
you have nothing to take to work
except yourself*

On top of all this comes the pressure of being forced to put in her own money if the till doesn't balance.

Then comes the final irony,

*& yet they tell me I have the luxury
of work*

in other words, shut up, don't complain, you should be grateful you have a job.

The repetition of the line,

yeah it's hard being a shop girl

portrays a tone of depression and powerlessness. She is angry but she seems unable to change her working conditions.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) The poem contains many examples of unfair, illegal working conditions and practices in this retail job. Make a list.



- 2) Research the laws governing work conditions in the retail industry.
 - 3) What could this girl do if she belonged to a union?
 - 4) Geoff creates many powerful images in this poem. Which one do you find the most powerful? Why?
 - 5) The retail sector varies hugely in pay and conditions for employees eg 'cash in hand' and the practice of working for items of clothing in clothing stores. Some employees have to put up with a high degree of coercion.
 - a) Give some examples if you can, maybe from your own or friends' experience.
 - 6) Many workplaces like this exist, where bosses benefit from the pain, the poor working conditions of others.
 - a) Research working conditions in other countries, particularly Third World countries.
 - b) see www.newint.org, the site for the New Internationalist magazine which fights for global justice, reporting on the unjust relationship between the powerful and powerless in both rich and poor nations.
 - 7) What is a 'sweat shop'?
 - a) Who works there?
 - b) Are some big brand names involved — eg Nike?
 - c) see Sweating for Nike: Labour Conditions in the Sports Shoe Industry:
 - d) www.caa.org.au/campaigns/nike/sweating.html#woe
 - e) www.sweatshopwatch.org/
 - f) www.nosweatapparel.com/
 - g) fairwear.org.au/ What is fairwear?
 - h) Fair surf wear www.awatw.org.au/fairwear/action/fairsurfwear.html
 - 8) What is 'outsourcing' or 'outwork'?
 - a) Why did the Fletcher Jones clothing factory in the South East of South Australia close down mid 2004, closely followed by the Levi Jeans factory in Elizabeth, north of Adelaide?
 - b) What impact does this have on local employment?
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8. On a Roll

'On a Roll' is a poem about the hypocrisy of banks. It seems the more profits they make the less service they give their customers.

The poem begins with a statement by the CEO of the Bank of Montreal in which he boasts of the enormous profit that the Bank had enjoyed over the past 5 years.

Geoff then gives us a lunchtime snapshot from inside one of their branches. We see long queues, frustrated customers and equally frustrated staff due to understaffing.

But the customers feel powerless to do anything against this monopoly, so they wait and wait.

Geoff on the other hand, demonstrates his dissatisfaction, and leaves.

ACTIVITIES

- 1) What can be done about corporate greed?
- 2) What is globalization and how are we affected by it?
see 'Beyond the Label' Fashion, Young Australians and Globalisation
Kathleen Gordon, Brian Hoepper, Suzette Mitchell, Queensland University of Technology
- 3) Geoff has used the word 'monopoly'.
 - a) What is a monopoly?
 - b) Does this practice conflict with the concept of a 'level playing field'?
- 4) List all the 'game' images used in the poem.
 - a) Geoff seems to be posing the question; are we being taken advantage of?
 - b) Discuss this in your group with reference to the corporate world.
- 5) Write down the lines in the poem that make you see, hear and feel the frustration of both the customers and Bank staff.
 - a) Note the play on words,

phew phew
few too few

- 6) Find out what qualifications you need to work in a Bank as a teller, loans advisor etc.
 - 7) Look at the profits that rich people make, CEOs of companies, look at their salaries, payouts etc. Try to find some examples.
 - a) Do you think this is fair?
 - 8) Are there any similarities between the Bank of Montreal and Australian banks?
 - a) If so what are they?
 - 9) Suggestion for student writing:
 - a) Notice how Geoff has begun his poem with a quotation as reported in a newspaper. Try to find a quotation from a newspaper or magazine and use it as a beginning for a poem of your own.
 - b) The quotation may also begin a group discussion, debate, playscript etc.
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