

Strike holds valuable life lessons for little ones [CA-BC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

My four-year-old son crossed his first picket line Friday. He wasn't alone -- he had his faithful bear-bear, a long stuffed snake, and a child care worker to escort him. The only thing he didn't have was mom or dad.

Because his preschool/day-care is located on Vancouver School Board property, parents had been politely asked not to cross the picket line. And so we stood with picketing teachers behind the linked chain at the foot of the driveway that separates the outside world from school property, and handed him over.

To prepare him for this, the night before I had carefully explained what a picket line was, given him a little backgrounder on the history of collective bargaining, and reminded him that I was out on a picket line pushing him in a stroller not long ago.

I let him know that in the olden days young boys like him were often sent to the children's workhouses where they were expected to work long hours in brutal conditions and had little hope of living to adulthood, so it was a good thing that we have come so far since the Industrial Revolution.

Before I could sing a refrain from The Internationale, he interrupted me. "But Mommy, who is going to wipe my bum?"

That one last thing we can't convince him he's old enough to do for himself, but one of the many things that are part of the daily drop-off ritual.

Let me explain.

You see, we are only just getting used to the new preschool. And there is a routine. We go in together. I help him find his cubby, put on his "inside shoes", take him to the bathroom to help him wash his hands really well, with soap, because the school is a nut-free zone and we must be careful not to transfer any possible peanut residues from home. Finally, most mornings, he procrastinates another few minutes by shutting himself in a bathroom cubicle, after which I am called in to perform the procedure mentioned above.

Then there is more hand-washing, followed by the long, tragic walk to the good-bye window where I wipe his tear-streaked face and leave him with a kiss through the grille and a promise I'm rarely able to fulfill: to pick him up early.

But Wednesday, while teachers were taking their vote to walk out, was a breakthrough day for the boy. When I picked him up, he announced, with face shining: "I didn't cry, not once, not the whole day."

Not only was he getting used to his new preschool, he told me, he actually liked it.

But now, who was going to ... ?

Friday, on the long walk up the driveway to the chain link barrier, where a dozen cheerful teachers wearing picket signs were gathered, Alexander kept his eyes glued firmly on the ground. He clutched his bear-bear and dragged his snake.

Then one of the picketers asked him about the snake. Another admired his light-up shoes. They thanked me for respecting their picket line. And when I handed him over to his escort, he didn't cry. Not one tear.

I like to think he understood a little about the principles we had discussed, though more likely he was just grateful I wasn't sending him to the children's workhouse.

The walk without mom was sombre, but his father and I have high hopes for this educational experience. If this helps him learn to finally do that last little thing for himself, I guess we'll have the BCTF to thank.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: British Columbia ^[2]

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