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Toronto on strike: No daycare, camps or pools, but the homeless are happy

Posted: July 13, 2009, 5:26 PM by Rob Roberts

[Kuitenbrouwer](#), [Toronto on strike](#)



Pools are shut, 52,000 children have had their swimming lessons and summer camps cancelled, and basketball courts have become temporary dumps. But at least one group is happy and well looked-after: the city's homeless.

"We love it now," said Chris Duncan, 25, who is staying at Seaton House, a shelter for 600 men on George Street in downtown Toronto. "They don't cook right now so they give us out food vouchers. Everything else is basically the same. We get clean towels and sheets. The laundry gets done."

With the city's 57 daycare centres locked and restaurant inspections, for example, suspended during a strike by unionized staff, the City of Toronto has redeployed dozens of managers from Public Health and Children's Services to work in the nine homeless shelters that the city owns. But not, in most cases, to cook.

So every day since the strike began 23 days ago, Seaton House has handed out hundreds of vouchers, worth \$7 or \$10 each, for Pizza Pizza, Swiss Chalet, Harveys, Tim Hortons, Ho-Lee Chow and Metro, the grocery store. At Seaton House, the men eat a cold breakfast: cereal, toast, bagels and juice. After 9 a.m. they get the first food voucher, plus two TTC tokens. At 3 p.m. Seaton House hands out another voucher for dinner.

Today Nasser Obsieh, 33, emerged from the shelter, peeled his \$7 gift card off its cardboard backing and walked the four blocks to Pizza Pizza, corner of Church and Dundas streets, where he ordered a slice of pepperoni pizza, a Coca-Cola and an iced tea.

"It's a great idea," Mr. Obsieh -- who survives on Ontario Disability Support Payments because he

hears the voices of ghosts -- said of the food voucher program. "It helps me enjoy fresh food and these are some of my favourite restaurants anyway."

John, another Seaton House resident spending his coupon at Pizza Pizza, said this beats the hostel food in every way.

"We get to choose what we eat and when we want to eat," he said. "Lots of people have TB, you don't have to be standing in line and deal with some of the unpleasant stuff."

Clearly the homeless don't deserve to suffer any more than anyone else does, during this walkout. They didn't cause it. Still, it is an interesting reflection of our city's priorities, that we cannot open even a single swimming pool during the strike, but we do everything we can for the homeless.

They seem quite comfortable. On Friday I watched a group of men toss around a football on George Street in front of Seaton House, while pickets watched. Today I watched one man smoke a crack pipe on the fence just outside the shelter.

Another man drank a beer.

A third man lit a cigarette in front of the main door. He then yelled to a police officer walking by, "Hey, buddy, tie your sneakers." He threw his empty cigarette pack and butt on the ground. Ronaldo, the Seaton House supervisor, came out and swept the butts and the cigarette carton into a dustpan.

Rob Andrusovich, a city spokesman, today defended the city's policy choices of locking daycares and redeploying staff to homeless shelters.

"The children have a roof over their heads," he said. "In this case Seaton House is the roof over peoples' heads."

Seaton House has several sections. Shelter occupants get the coupons. Residents of The Annex, where the city runs a "harm reduction program," are still getting hot meals, Garry Blowes, who lives there, told me. Mr. Blowes has been on both sides of the strike: he worked 25 years for Metro Toronto.

"I threw it all away for booze," he said. "I'm not proud of it, but I'm so sick I can't leave. I have cancer and emphysema."

Even during the strike, he added, the city has continued its policy of giving him and other residents a glass of wine every 90 minutes. Mr. Blowes said he has bought food vouchers, at half price, from some of the other men.

"A lot of these punks are so ungrateful," of what the city does for them, he said.

A striker talks to a man outside the Seaton House today. Photo by Brett Gundlock, National Post



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by yyz53

Truth about Unions?

Jul 13 2009

7:41 PM

Check the website at www.cupelocal79.org and you will see their logo which seems to imply that membership results in the devolution from Homo Erectus through Neanderthal back to pre-human ape. Am I misinterpreting?

by ewnaly
Jul 14 2009
6:50 AM

To deprive children of their summer programs is unconscionable. Surely in the year 2009, there must be a better way to settle labour disputes without hurting innocent people, especially young children.

by rgmurray
Jul 14 2009
7:45 AM

ewnaly: you neglected to use the rallying cry "WON'T SOMEONE THINK OF THE CHILDREN?!"

With regard to hurting innocent people, who in this city isn't innocent in this dispute? Surely the children aren't alone; the homeless, and anyone else who isn't city manager or striking union head.

The difference in shutting down a care facility like The Annex is that people die as a result of closing its doors.

If your child can't go to daycare, that can be inconvenient, but no immediate harm is likely.

by Darren in TO
Jul 14 2009
8:04 AM

rgmurray, if a significant portion of the nation's homeless were not being shipped to TO, they wouldnt be in this mess now, would they? And they added to the financial mess this city is subjected to. The ones who came here to this city from elsewhere had a choice in the matter. Children do not. Please put a few minutes' worth of though into it before you compare children to homeless people

by fatherjohn
Jul 14 2009
9:55 AM

I,ve always been a strong union supporter BUT no pools for the children in the summer is totally against what unions were originally set up for..to take care of the people..to ensure that the working people and their families had access to some of the same benefits as the rich businessmen. This not right!

by Sparky28
Jul 14 2009
10:52 AM

Labour unions do not represent "working people." Unionized workers are not the "working people," they are a labour aristocracy who use extortion, thuggery and gangsterism to get what they think they're entitled to.

The only people they are hurting with their strike are real working people who have to tap whatever savings they might have to pay for babysitters so they can go to work.

There is a harm to children not being able to go to daycare -- their parents' cash flow and even their jobs.

Feel sorry all you want for drunks and crackheads, but their current situation is their own doing. And they don't create or contribute anything to society. They're nothing but a burden on the real working people who have had their lives turned upside down by the strike. Their tax dollars are being flushed down the toilet, they're not getting the services they signed on for, they're going into debt to keep their kids in care so they can go to their jobs and pay more taxes and get nothing for it. Has nobody ever heard of a social contract?

So the drunks and crackheads get free fast food and... please... don't forget the wine. Wouldn't want any of them getting the shakes or having alcohol withdrawal seizures,

would we?

So, to review... thugs have taken over the city, kids have to stay in their houses, parents have to go into debt and stress out about what to do with them so they can still work and give their money to the people who won't stand up to thugs... and drunks and crackheads get free food and wine. It's a classic Canadian story.

BTW... my own father is a drunk and would probably be in the streets if he didn't have an inheritance to live off. Useless pukes like him who have squandered the family, jobs, money and lives they have been given are the last people who should be first in line to get help.

by Darren in TO Very well said Sparky

Jul 14 2009

7:38 PM