



Steph Sorensen: How one mom learned to hate capitalism

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On a cold Thursday last November, I held my seven-year-old son's mittened hand as we walked through Downtown Pittsburgh. We were headed for the Steel Building, a matte black dagger of a skyscraper.

Cloth masks shielded our faces from wind whipping against the square of cardboard we'd prepared back home, a trail of glitter in our wake. We moved through the crowd and I boosted my son onto the median, where he inspected some pigeon feathers before taking the cardboard. He raised it above his head.

Written on it, in black Sharpie outlined with red glitter glue: **SOLIDARITY!** The vocabulary word of the day. It was his first time on a picket line. Mine, too.

We were there with the Pittsburgh chapter of Democratic Socialists of

America, showing support for UPMC workers striking to demand higher wages, safe staffing and the right to unionize without retaliation.

“Doctors, nurses, cleaners, cooks and all kinds of people work at hospitals,” I explained that morning, as we decorated our sign over banana oatmeal. “Their bosses aren’t paying them enough, and not hiring enough workers to care for the sick people. A strike is how workers come together to tell their bosses that they aren’t getting what they need, and they’re not going to work anymore until they do. And ‘solidarity’ means...” I prompted, gesturing to the outlined word he carefully filled in with marker.

“Helping each other,” he answered.

Good enough for second grade. I took a photo, uploaded it to a project organizer under the heading Social Studies. This is homeschool, during a pandemic, under capitalism.

In March 2020, caregivers everywhere collectively panicked about what to do with their kids, their jobs and their lives as schools shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. That gut-churning stew of helplessness and desperation, of feeling unseen and let down by society itself: It wasn’t new to me.

By the time my son began kindergarten at our neighborhood public school, he’d already been asked to leave numerous daycares, preschools and camps. I had spent the summer before kindergarten fruitlessly begging the principal for supports and accommodations.

Already we had been through years of evaluations, assorted three-and-four-letter diagnoses, medications, therapies, treatments. Attending appointments, researching specialists, practicing behavioral interventions — plus the regular work of parenting — was a fulltime job.

Before one month of kindergarten concluded, I was informed that if my son ran out of the school building again, staff would call 911. I imagined my baby fleeing the overwhelming confusion he knew as school and running into the busy street.

Or chased down by cops, terrified and dysregulated. Half of the victims of police killings are people with disabilities, and children are no exception.

My son wasn't expelled, exactly. Our district prohibits expulsions before third grade. But it was clear the school was not willing or able to keep him safe.

My family had managed to scrape by until then, but we were nearing default on our student debt. We'd been counting on the free education and childcare public schooling promised. I felt ashamed about being unable to contribute financially, and constantly worried I was failing my child. At conference tables surrounded by special education coordinators and administrators I'd ask, trying not to cry: "How am I supposed to work? What am I supposed to do?"

My questions were answered by the unhelpful refrain: "School isn't childcare." Translation: figure it out yourself.

Traditional school, its six-hour days spent quietly seated, didn't work for my kid — so there was nothing for him.

Teachers and education experts decry the long days, lack of physical activity, dearth of opportunities for unstructured play, crowded class sizes, teaching to tests. Solutions to these problems would benefit all children, including mine.

And yet those solutions seemed out of reach. I was too alone, and too busy trying to stay afloat, to come up with an answer.

It was here, as a mom struggling to help my son and keep my family going, that I became keenly aware of *systemic* injustice. Our social structures are built for a particular kind of person — self-sufficient, competitive, profit-driven — but it turns out most people aren't like that. Most people are different. Most people — all people — need others.

Enter COVID-19. Caregivers everywhere were suddenly thrown into the same sorry situation I'd attempted to manage for years. Parents were offered half-solutions that everyone knew were insufficient: learning pods for the most privileged children (and being left unsupervised for the least), virtual school, hybrid school, distanced and masked school. None of these worked very well for students, teachers or families. But that was all that was offered.

Figure it out yourself.

We started homeschooling, and my son flourished, finally getting the one-on-one attention, shorter days and play breaks he needs to thrive and learn. Other caregivers flailed, trying to make the best of bad options.

Witnessing thousands of parents going through echoes of what I had endured showed me that it wasn't my fault. Or my son's. Our experience was a systemic failure, not an obstacle to be overcome as individuals.

I searched the internet unsuccessfully for something called a "parents union," hoping there was some group that could provide solidarity. Then I read the history of labor resistance I hadn't been taught in school. I discovered the power suffused in struggle, when you aren't struggling alone. I Googled, "what is socialism?" I joined DSA.

My child was thrown away by the public school system for the same reason thousands were forced to work and die during a pandemic, the same reason people starve in a country with more than enough food, and freeze on sidewalks in a city with thousands of vacant homes: Under capitalism, those who don't fit, who have greater needs, who aren't valued, and who don't generate profit are discarded. It doesn't have to be this way. We can make it better together.

Back at the picket line, my son was starting to shiver. We'd head home soon. He still held SOLIDARITY!, but lower now, because his arms were tired.

"Do we know them?" he asked, watching UPMC workers march and chant.

"No. But we could be them, one day. For now, we can support them—"

"So here we are," he finished, raising his sign again as I reached out to help.

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