

Our Common Cause

Talk by Alastair Haythornthwaite, JMM, 2012/01/22

We subtitle these memorials "Our Common Condition".

This is not just because Workers in Canada today face the same challenges to Justice and Democracy across the country.

This not just because Joseph Mairs and his fellow miners faced multi-national corporate employers as we do today.

It is because, since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, economic and political structures in this country, and in the Western world as a whole, have not changed their fundamental relationships between workers and employers.

By the First World War, the role of the individual entrepreneur, as the dynamic centre of the growth in the economy was over. The term Robber Baron has been applied to the leading industrialist of the 19th Century: Astor, Carnegie, Cooke, Fisk, Mellon, Morgan, Rockefeller and Vanderbilt. Canada had its own masters of industry: James Dunsmuir, Donald Mann and William Mackenzie all are part of the story of Joseph Mairs and miners uprising.

As War clouds gathered in Europe, the financial sector was in the driver's seat. Industrial capital was now subservient to the banks and investors. James Dunsmuir divested himself of the major family industrial holdings; the E and N Railway to CPR in 1905 and R. Dunsmuir and Sons' coal empire to Mackenzie and Mann of the Canadian Northern Railroad. The coal mines were reorganized into the Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd. Canadian Collieries is the employer who locked out the miners for expressing safety concerns, triggering the Great Coal Strike of 1912-1914.

The Canadian Northern Railway and Canadian Collieries (Dunsmuir) Ltd represented English investment in Canada. The investors never realized much from the Canadian Northern. The railway's finances became so precarious by 1918 that it was taken over by the government forming the heart of Canadian National Railway in 1923. The coal mines on the other hand paid handsome dividends on the blood of the miners.

Like mining corporations today, the attitude towards the workers was hostile and the actions cruel and callous. Just as Rio Tinto Alcan locked out 800 workers in Quebec on January 1 of this year and Vale Inco has precipitated a series of lengthy strikes and lockouts, so Canadian Collieries did not hesitate to punish workers and their Union's for their solidarity with the men who warned of dangerous gas underground.

Our Common Cause does not leave us prostrate and beaten before the Citadel of Capital. Far from it, all the small and large dribbles of opposition are flowing together to form a mighty wave. A wave, once co-ordinated, which can wash our country clean of exploitation and privilege and bring about fundamental change. A society and an economy with the interests of the population as its first and last priority; no longer functioning as an agent of the wealthy and powerful but as the agent of advancement for all who dwell in our land.

For such a dream, Joseph Mairs left this life far too young.

Joseph, we living today, 98 years after your fateful death, do not forget the struggles you, your family and your comrade fellow miners waged for Justice and Democracy.

We continue, in big ways and small, to move towards a new world. A world where for everyone there is work, rest and fulfillment, as best as this land can provide.