

Joseph Mairs Address by Alastair Haythornthwaite

January 20th, 2008

Brothers and Sisters, Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends....

It is hard to believe that this is the Sixth Year we have met in Ladysmith to honour a young worker.....

A young miner whose courage and fortitude to stand up for his family and community was rewarded with arrest, incarceration, sickness and death...

all before his twenty-second birthday.

Before he was able to marry and have children to carry on his family's proud name...Mairs.

An immigrant from Scotland, he and his father went down into the dark, dirty wet bowels of the earth to wrest coal to the surface where it made some men, sanctioned by birth or luck, millionaires. Coal that powered the British Empire, fed the steam locomotives and steam ships that brought all the wealth of the world to England's door. Coal that powered the mighty warships of the Grand Fleet, battleships and cruisers and gunboats that sailed around the world to crush any rival....

To defeat any threat to the Crown that might impede the vast accumulations of private wealth .

And these men who fed this mighty edifice to strut across the globe, what was their share? Their share was mean wages, over priced goods in Company stores, over priced rents in the Company houses and the prospect of sudden death in an explosion deep underground or a slow, suffocating death from black lung in their fourth or fifth decade.

But men are not beasts unable to change their world. Joseph and his fellow miners understood that the callous greed of the mine owners allowed dangerous conditions to become deadly.

They knew the real wealth that each filled coal car carried to market and they resolved to fight for their lives and their families' lives.

Coming from Scotland, these miners were well aware that workers, by banding together into a Union and by sticking together, could change their lives and share a little more of the bounty that their labour produced. For them, the threats from the police and militias, the eviction from Company housing and the empty stomachs of their children were no more intimidating than the horrors they risked each time they went down the mine shaft. The Army was much less threatening than an explosion of methane and cold dust or a sudden rush of icy water half a mile underground.

The United Mine Workers of America had been organising the Vancouver Island Coal Mines for a couple of years.

In 1912, when a one day walk out over the firing and blacklisting of Union supporters, escalated into an industry wide lock out, the miners took up the challenge with a grim determination they had learned surviving day to day.

Families were evicted from Company housing and scabs were brought in. The militia set up barbed wire at the mine heads and menaced the locked out workers with rifle and bayonet. The miners, and their wives and children, set up a camp on some waste ground at the edge of town and settled in for a long struggle.

A year later, the solidarity of the miners and their families was still strong. In August 1913, miners in Ladysmith, led by men who would become long serving MLAs two decades hence, took the initiative into their own hands. Forming up into a column, they drove the scabs and police from Ladysmith. Three days later, more militia backed by a heavy machine gun section of the Seaforth Highlanders entered the town and made mass arrests. Joseph and his father were brought before the bench. Joseph pled guilty and was sent to Okalla prison in Burnaby. He died within its forbidding walls after medical attention was withheld for a critical 72 hours. Only 10 days before he had been a strong young man clearing land. The Coroner's Inquest strongly condemned the negligence of his care.

Since that dark day, many of the basic rights Joseph fought for have been won. Health and safety has been implemented to level that would amaze those brave miners. Wages allow for more than subsistence. Unions are part of the legal framework of our Society. But the same dark forces of Empire and millionaires work tirelessly to regain the absolute power they held in 1912 and our march forward has stalled as we struggle to hold onto what was won before,

Won by blood, plain and simple, the blood of previous generations, and the sacrifice of those before us.

Our duty to Joseph and, all the other Joseph's like him, is to never give up,
to never to be disheartened
and to proudly unfurl the banner of Justice and Dignity and march forward to finish the
tasks started by men like Joseph Mairs.

Thanks you.