

**Joseph Mairs Address**  
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**Alastair Haythornthwaite**

It has been all but a century since coal miners from Wellington to Ladysmith were locked out in 1912, the start of a two year labour struggle, only ended with the start of the Great War.

The most striking thing about this struggle is how much and how little things have changed over the intervening near hundred years. After the First World War, workers fought long hard bitter struggles for union recognition and the right to bargaining collectively. While pursuing immediate demands for the right to bargain wages and working conditions, unionists had their eye on the long term. Socialism and other models of social and economic justice were the final destination, the hopes and dreams that sustained workers when the prospects of justice seemed so far away.

From the late 1930s on, Unions won recognition at major industrial facilities but it was not until the Ford strike of 1945 and Justice Rand's ruling of 1946 was the mandatory collection of Union dues imposed in Canada.

This created a solid financial base upon which the post war trade union movement was built. With a steady and dependable income, Unions changed from member-volunteer driven organizations to paid staff administered business unionism. To be clear, business unionism is not a negative as the professional staff of the Unions delivered a high level of service in bargaining, grievance handling and other support such as appeals to Workman Compensation. But in the change to a paid staff, something was lost. Starting with the suppression of Communist led Unions such as the Canadian Seamen's Union and coupled a purge of left wing politics from trade unions; the dream of a better world was lost.

The CCF, predecessor to the NDP, still maintained a socialist programme but pursued it within the confines of acceptance of existing systems of profit and exploitation. The fundamental point of early unionists that the system of monopolies, sometimes referred to as Capitalism, was in direct opposition to justice, democracy and equality was lost, as left leaning politicians and Unions attempted to curb the abuses of the free market without making a change to the system of ownership.

Unions became integrated into the system of mass production. Unions would advocate for business export plans and became a partner in the big industrial concerns, curbing for their mutual benefit, the worst excesses of management. As large profits were being generated, there were plenty of crumbs to give a rising standard of living to the union workers. The mass production system allowed workers to achieve a level of material comfort if not security. But by the early 1970s, the strains were starting to show. Real wages stagnated even as the level of wealth in society increased exponentially. In essence, a massive redistribution of wealth was occurring, as workers incomes first stagnated and then fell in real terms. As the new century approached, the mass production system started to be dismantled in North America as manufacturing was transferred first to Mexico and then to Asia.

Union workers now found themselves abandoned by the economic system they partnered with, without any understanding of why. It was not a matter of unfair trade deals or even excessive corporate greed, though obviously that did not help. The

economic system based on profiting from all aspects of human life was the real culprit but the understanding had been lost over the good years from 1945 to 1965. By 2002, all the signs of trouble were there: the tech bubble had burst with multi billion dollar losses; rampant and unregulated speculation was distorting all economies and foreign wars of aggression were being heralded as wars for democracy. Unions tried to deal with the excesses but were trapped supporting the very institutions that created the mayhem.

With the economic crisis now unfolding with a ferocity not seen since 1929 and even the most shining pillars of the free market crashing to the ground, the unsustainable nature of human societies built on profit will once again be understood by unions and workers.

Our theme today is “Who will pay for the crisis”? The wealthy, who hoard a king’s ransom, while laying off the work force, already have a system in place. Workers will pay for the crisis, through the loss of their jobs, their homes and their pensions.

Union workers have to raise a different plan. The rich will pay for the crisis. The flow toward greater inequity in income distribution must be reversed and then the entire system of exploitation must be dismantled and replaced by a modern democracy. The progressive role for the state is the welfare of the population. All the energies of our country will go towards creating justice and equality at home and abroad.