



# Joseph Mairs Memorial

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## **Talk Given by Dale McCartney at the January 23, 2005 Joseph Mairs Memorial in Ladysmith BC**

Thank you very much. My name is Dale McCartney, and as mentioned I am a graduate student at Simon Fraser University. Today I want to briefly discuss one of the earliest left-wing political parties in this province's history - the Socialist Party of Canada, and consider their impact on Joseph Mairs and his times.

To begin, I want to address a question I have been asked a few times in the past week or so. Why the SPC? Why are we discussing the SPC today, when we are remembering a young man who likely never belonged to the party? The context of our lives defines who we are, in a profound way. I think that there is no way that Joseph would have been able to do what he did without a political context that suggested real change was not only necessary, but possible. These sorts of ideas can only be broadly popular in a political context like the one he lived in, which would shock us today with its diversity and radicalism. As the title of my talk suggests, discussions of radical politics were widely available and tremendously popular. Leading the field of groups engaged in discussing and working for socialism was the SPC.

The SPC was founded by a group of smaller socialist parties, who soon came under the sway of one of the most popular of BC's socialist speakers, a British printer named E. T. Kingsley. Kingsley was known as one of the great orators of his time, as well as one of the most doctrinaire Marxists, an adherent to the theory of impossibilism. This type of Marxism emphasized ideological purity, even at the risk of irrelevance. In 1903 Kingsley led his ragtag Revolutionary Socialist Party of Canada into the newly founded SPC fold, and took over as the new party's leading theoretical light. To this end, he pushed a party orthodoxy that eschewed involvement with unions, or anything else he viewed as reformist elements. As he explained in *The Western Clarion* on December 26, 1903, "the Socialist Party cannot depend on the support of members of trade unions unless they are to go back on union principles. The principles of unionism and socialism are antagonistic. To support one is to deny the other, no man can serve two masters."<sup>1</sup>

Despite Kingsley's professed disdain for unions and other "reformist

elements," the party was too inclusive to prevent an influx of less doctrinaire members. Among these was James Hawthornthwaite, who served as a Socialist MLA for more than ten years. Although Hawthornthwaite was not always true to his professed principles, his continued success with the electorate of Nanaimo demonstrates how instantly popular this new socialist party was with the miners of Vancouver Island. He and his peer Parker Williams even held the balance of power in the legislature briefly after the election of 1907. Both of these men, as well as the majority of the successful candidates fielded by the SPC, came from mining communities on the Island.

In 1905 the SPC began publishing a newspaper on a sometimes weekly, sometimes monthly basis. The paper proudly proclaimed it was "By and For the Working Class," and remained committed to this principle until it was banned by the Canadian government after the First World War. The tenor of its pages often reflected the tenor of the SPC - Marxist, spirited and divisive. A typical issue might have included one installment of a twelve part series on the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe; a collection of book reviews discussing books published by socialists and liberals in the United States and Great Britain, and one or two editorials scouring other groups on the left - the Industrial Workers of the World, the Social Democratic Party of Canada, or a number of other foes - for their inappropriate political line. Tucked between these turgid and sectarian pieces, however, would be updates on recent political action throughout the country, discussions of current affairs from an informed Marxist perspective, and many propaganda pieces carrying out coherent socialist attacks on elite political parties and the employing class in general. Thus, while the paper, and the party, sometimes descended into trite intellectualizing, as opposed to actually engaging with the issues of their time, this limited approach was tempered by a fighting spirit that made the paper and the party both relevant and exciting to workers like Joseph.

In 1910, the divisions within the party led to a split, with a reformist element becoming the Social Democratic Party of Canada. The SPC turned its attentions after the split away from parliamentary politics - the leading SPC MLA's left with the SDP or became Liberals - and instead tried to fulfill a new role. The party continued to agitate for radical political change, and continued to work at its commitment as a source of Marxist intellectual critique and education. But the party also involved itself more heavily in the actions of the broader left, trying to radicalize some of the most important of left wing institutions, especially the BC labour movement.



Although socialists had always been involved in the labour movement in BC, by about 1910 the SPC was the political party of choice for labour leaders and more than three thousand rank and filers throughout the province. The SPC never would succeed in playing a major role in the provincial legislature, but SPC members controlled the Vancouver

Trades and Labour Council, the Victoria Trades and Labour Council, and the newly founded BC Federation of Labour by the time the Great Coal Strike began. The Party's platform continued to reflect a rigorous Marxism that argued that unions were only a stopgap against the spread of capitalism. Nonetheless, party leaders had come to recognize the importance of unions in improving the lives of workers immediately, and the party's energetic thinkers became more involved in building the union movement in BC. This would have enormous consequences for the province, and for Joseph Mairs.

I do not want to suggest that the SPC was purely a BC phenomenon. Time constraints today will prevent me from expanding on their role throughout the country too extensively, but I do want to mention that they were a powerful national force. This was especially true in the Maritimes, where the party became a key voice struggling for the rights of workers, especially miners. The party also had a presence in Ontario where it contested and won a few provincial elections, and in Quebec, confirming it as one of the first left wing Anglo parties (and perhaps the last) to recognize Quebec as a colonized minority within Canada's borders. Closer to BC, and Joseph, the party had an important base of power in the Crows Nest Pass, where it was enormously popular with the rank and file and leadership of UMWA District 18. The connection of the union and the party in District 18 continued to be a relationship characterized by contradictions. Organizers for the UMWA would get new members to sign cards even as they explained to them the importance of political action, over and above action on the job-site. Impossibilism still reigned as the key plank of the party platform, even if the actions of party membership increasingly revealed their determination to involve themselves in supposedly reformist elements.

The ties between the UMWA and the SPC in Alberta were important in convincing the UMWA to attempt to unionize the miners on Vancouver Island. Prominent SPC members, including Joseph Naylor and Ginger Goodwin, became organizers for the UMWA's campaign on the Island. The SPC also received a small influx of members corresponding to the union drive, and suggesting that these organizers were talking about more than just the union. I am not trying to suggest that the majority of union organizers - or members - were in the SPC - this is impossible to confirm - I am only trying to suggest that prominent union organizers combined their labour activism with a political dedication to socialism, a dedication that profoundly shaped the form the strike took and heavily influenced the miners involved. Even Oscar Mottishaw, the union organizer who was fired from his position in Nanaimo after he reported unacceptable gas levels - that is, the miner whose firing sparked the strike - was an SPC member. By 1912, the labour movement in BC was at one of its most radical and militant stages, and the SPC was deeply involved in shaping the thinking of the workers.



Since the SPC collapsed in the 20's, many have criticized the party's

actual role in the strike on the Island. George Hardy, a staunch Communist who early in his career flirted with the SPC and the IWW, decried the role of the SPC in the strike many decades after the fact. He wrote that the "leading lights" of the party were "spittoon philosophers" who, "Nero-like . . . fiddled while the armed forces of the State suppressed the miners and locked up resisters" on the Island. This estimation does a disservice to the party, however. Although the SPC spent less time discussing the strike than some might have preferred, many of its members were deeply involved, as I have discussed. What's more, the party came to life when the rebellion became physical in August 1913. After the miners were arrested, Jack Kavanagh, an important young leader of the SPC, joined wobblies and social democrats in founding the Miners' Liberation League, dedicated to freeing the jailed miners. Kavanagh wrote a pamphlet history of the strike that was a key propaganda piece, and contributed to the widespread public sympathy that the imprisoned miners enjoyed. Although the circumstances of Joseph's imprisonment were the obvious causes for his elevation to martyr status, it was the Miners' Liberation League, using the platform provided by the SPC, that ensured the broad public knowledge required to make Joseph's death the key political issue it was.

I am not the only one who believes that the role of the SPC in the Great Coal strike was more than just fiddling while Extension burned. After the miners took control of Ladysmith, a spooked provincial government hired a Pinkerton agent to come to the Island and spy on the miners and the union. The agent, who reported to the Commissioner of the Provincial Police, wrote several months worth of letters before his contract was up and he returned to the United States. Specifically his orders were to ascertain the likelihood of further violence, and he tried to discover who provoked the violence in August. In both tasks he was unsuccessful, and his letters are filled with frustration. Throughout these letters runs an obvious theme. The agent, likely influenced by experience in the United States and the concern of his superiors about the radicalism of the miners, is hunting not only for whispers of violence, but also for a way to gauge the miners' dedication to socialism. Although Hardy may have believed that the SPC was no factor in the strike, the powers of the state were clearly concerned that the party's ideology was spreading among the miners.

Several of his stories jump out at us, and indicate how concerned he and his superiors were that the miners on the Island were dedicated revolutionaries. One example that I enjoy is a letter he wrote about the bar culture of the miners in Nanaimo. He tells of the fact that the miners met in the bars all over the Island to discuss the proceedings of the strike, and to be just generally jovial. Perhaps



because the letters were written to a superior, the Pinkerton agent includes a discussion of his attempts to listen in on bar conversation, without actually participating in the drinking. To do this, he tells the commissioner, he would sidle up just behind the men standing at the bar, and listen carefully without pushing to the bar itself. He reports

somewhat defensively, however, that every time he did this a miner would slip a little money into his pocket, and make room for him to reach the bar so he could buy a drink. He fearfully noted that this represented a symbol of socialism, as the miners attempted to both share their wealth and do it in a way that would not offend his pride by publicly acknowledging his insolvency. The agent could not easily explain the reason for this sort of behaviour - it didn't seem to compute in his worldview. All he can suggest to his boss is that the miners truly believed in the spirit of socialism, which was probably what his employers most feared.

Notwithstanding the agent's hysteria, he was right to worry about the popularity of socialism among the strikers. During the strike socialist rhetoric was very popular. It became so prominent that the strikers invited the famous American revolutionary Mother Jones to address them, which she did in 1913 in Cumberland. Partly as a result of their role in the strike the SPC entered the war as the Province's most relevant left wing party, and it was a major player in the radical left outside of parliamentary politics as well.

It was in the war that the party, and the BC left in general, underwent some of its most significant changes. When the war began, the SPC was still an impossibilist party, sometimes running political candidates in provincial elections, which in theory at least opposed focusing on trade unions but practically recognized that their main constituents were unionists. By the time the war ended, all pretenses of impossibilism were gone, as the party called actively for general strikes. It had come to grips with its competitors on the left, inviting all of them to publish their work in the party newspaper after the majority of them were declared illegal in 1918. Meanwhile, the party sent its most important thinkers to Calgary in 1919, where it played the key role in organizing a new labour federation, called the One Big Union. Not related to the IWW, despite sharing a moniker, the SPC's OBU was a sort of early industrial union, that promised to organize all workers according to industry, instead of according to skill. The SPC also faced a serious split over the perceived promise of the Russian Revolution. Although slow to recognize its significance when it began, by 1918 the party paper published Leon Trotsky's *The Bolsheviki And World Peace*, becoming the first left wing newspaper in Canada to do so. Ultimately, the aftershocks of 1917 would split the party along the lines of the Third International, but only after a few more years of furious action.

The changes wrought to the party during the Great War were enormous, and reflected the scope of the changes wrought on the world by that conflict. But a few are worth noting, as they explain the trajectory of the party before its collapse.



During the war, the party almost totally abandoned parliamentary action. This choice was made for a few reasons, most of them having to do with budget concerns. Instead, the party focused on propaganda

against the war, and remained fundamentally opposed to the conflict, one of the few socialist parties in the world to do so. During the war, the popularity of SPC speakers soared. Although the majority of the population became reactionary and supported the war almost unquestioningly, those who felt differently became starved of other voices. Thus the speaking events that SPC speakers like Kavanagh, William Pritchard, Ernest Winch and Helena Gutteridge spoke at were very popular, and thousands heard them speak all over the province.

Also during the war, the party found its ties to organized labour falling apart. Labour federations found themselves under enormous pressure to conform to government demands of labour peace, as well as to support the war. At first they resisted, threatening strikes should the government escalate troop commitments or even discuss conscription. Nothing came of these threats, however, and the SPC became more and more isolated in the labour press in their attacks on the war effort. When conscription began to be openly discussed by the federal government, the labour bodies found their spirit again, and promised a general strike should the draft be created. When the government began registering workers so as to draft them, however, the national Trades and Labour Council's resistance collapsed. More importantly to the SPC, the BC Fed followed suit, refusing to call a general strike when the first man was conscripted in BC. Some former SPCers were involved in this betrayal as well, including Parmeter Pettipiece. The remaining radical element of the SPC came to believe that the traditional labour had reached the end of its effectiveness, and so they began formulating a new type of labour movement. This would come to fruition in 1919, at the Western Labour Conference, where the SPC joined labour activists from more than three hundred unions west of the Great Lakes in forming a new labour body, the One Big Union. This new labour body promptly sent fraternal greetings to the Bolsheviks and the German Socialists, who then appeared destined to bring a revolution to Germany. They also watched as SPCers and unionists led the biggest strike wave Canada has ever known, starting in Winnipeg but spreading from coast to coast, ultimately resulting in 3.4 million workdays lost to strike. It appeared that the SPC had made the first steps towards the change it had agitated for during the previous two decades.

While 1919 marked the realization of much of the work of the SPC, it also spelled the end of the party itself. The Canadian government made the party paper illegal early in the year, and the majority of the party's activists spent more time working on the OBU than the party itself. In 1920, the party began a debate that would last more than a year and would lead to rhetoric more vicious than any of the divisions earlier in the party's history. This debate was about whether or not the party should join the newly created third international, run by the Bolsheviks and clearly intended to encourage the formation of Bolshevik parties around the world. Many activists in Canada worried that the importation of a foreign organizing strategy would slow progress, not speed it up, but the excitement of the Russian Revolution



swept many of the SPC's most energetic thinkers up with it. Most prominent in the debate for the Communist faction was Jack Kavanagh, by that time one of the SPC's most recognizable figures. He led more than half the party's membership out in 1921, and into the newly formed Communist Party of Canada. Although the party straggled along until 1925, it was effectively dead after 1921. What had once been the loudest and most persistent voice for socialism in BC fell quiet.

So what to make of this meandering narrative? I hope with this little outline I have provided some idea of the events that shaped the early socialist movement in BC, particularly in terms of the role the Socialist Party of Canada had in those events. But in honour of Joseph, I think it is worthwhile to return to the SPC's role in his life, in order to explain the importance of my little story.

Joseph did not do many of the things we honour him for today to support the SPC. He probably joined the UMWA because the mines were terrifyingly dangerous, the wages far too low, and the working conditions brutal. He likely participated in the insurrection of August 1913 because he was threatened, because the strike would fail if they allowed the scabs to reactivate the mines, because he was provoked on a personal level. He certainly would have died in jail regardless of the SPC, because their existence had no effect on the presence of doctors, or even on the humanity of the prison regime in BC at the time. But the SPC was a key part in his belief that these actions would work. That these actions, these enormous sacrifices, would achieve something real, something powerful, for him and his descendents. I don't know if Joseph was a socialist, a Marxist, or political at all outside of his union membership. But I do know that he would have been exposed to these ideas, affected by them, had to contend with them. And that sort of political climate - in which Marxists spoke on almost every corner - profoundly shaped his actions, and how they were perceived. In this way, I believe that we should honour the SPC today as we honour Joseph, connecting them and respecting the sacrifices they made together. Because, as we today are faced with challenges that they would be sadly familiar with, we can draw strength from the successes they left us, and build on these to build a better world for our descendents. Thank you very much for your time and attention, and all honour and respect to Joseph and the millions of other workers who have made sacrifices to make the world a better place.

Thank you.