

**The Panel Discussion**  
**Joseph Mairs Memorial January 23, 2011**

*“In the footsteps of the struggles, which brought advances for working people in the last century, how can we build a democratic political program which meets our needs now?”*

Chair and Founder of the Joseph Mairs Memorial Committee, Alastair Haythornthwaite, opened the discussion with a short summation of the history of Labour Politics in Canada. He reviewed the advances made by workers in Canada of the last 150 years, noting the right to form Unions and bargain collectively has been confirmed by the Supreme Court of Canada as a fundamental part of The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. But the economic landscape had not changed significantly since the time of Joseph Mairs as corporate monopolies still dominate the economic and political life of Canada. The role of independent labour candidates in influencing the policies and platforms of the major parties culminated in Tommy Douglas getting universal healthcare for the nation. The present day attempts by the wealthiest 5% of the population to roll back all the advances made by labour must be met by workers fighting both to preserve what we have won and to advance workers rights towards a modern Public Democracy. The full address is available at <http://josephmairs.ca>

The panel included Sister Ellen Oxman (President of the Nanaimo Duncan and District Labour Council), Brother Stan Dzbik (President of Machinist LL456) and Sister Barb Biley (HEU) from the Comox Valley with founding members Duncan Brown (USW) and Alastair Haythornthwaite (Machinists) acting as moderators. The discussion started with opening remarks from the panellists.

Sister Ellen spoke of the need to bring people into politics one at a time. The mainstream parties do everything they can to discourage participation in politics by people. Ellen noted there is a lot of work to do but it can be done.

Brother Stan noted this is a difficult question to answer. He noted the high level of apathy especially amongst youth. He found you have to work hard to convince people to take part. Stan is convinced labour needs its own media and the mainstream media is convincing workers to work against their own self interest.

Sister Barb opened with a promise her job was to cheer people up. She noted the prevailing definition of politics as the domain of rich and powerful people. In fact, politics is a dirty word amongst the people. She defined politics as the ability to participate in decisions which affect our lives. She predicted the gap between political perception and political power will grow. everyday farmers, workers and fishers are told they do not know enough to make the decisions. We need workers to represent us not as parties but as community peers. These are the people who will take a stand and say NO to bad policies.

Ellen picked up the tread noting the tide is changing in municipalities where the need of honest representation was keenly felt. Ellen observed a lot of decisions which affect people's lives are made at the municipal level.

Stan raised the problem of candidates accepting support from Labour Councils and individuals on the basis of supporting a progressive program. But once elected, these representatives do what they want and often side with business and the government against the interests of their supporters. Stan would like to see some control over elected officials. Not controlling our own media, Stan said, is one reason this happens.

Barb observed community organizations and their activists, formed to oppose private developments or government programs, work to become experts in the matter under dispute. She spoke of Coal Watch, whose members have developed expertise on coal mining and the environment, as an example of a locally based group who oppose foreign capital and government policies. She felt the recall campaign against Comox Valley MLA, Don McRae, was another example of political power in the hands of the people.

Moderator Alastair asked the panel, "What worked in the past? Is it still viable and valid today?" Ellen knows organizing still works as does a healthy dash of righteous indignation. Unions today, Ellen continued, are more political and work harder than in the past. The spirit needed is a desire to make things better for everyone, not just union members. People want change Ellen pointed out and we have no reason to be afraid. We can get our changes, not through violence, but political, if people participate.

Stan observed poverty was a big motivator in the past but people's lives are much better now and, as people have enough, they are not so moved to stand up and fight. Stan thinks people need to see the corporations take away what we have, bit by bit.

Barb took this moment to thank the Joseph Mairs Memorial for organizing this discussion. She knows it is better to have everyone involved. She noted in the past people knew what they wanted and organized to reach their goals. She gave a modern day example in the Stelco workers against US Steel who have mobilized their entire city to hold the monopoly, US Steel, accountable. The USW local at Stelco has held weekly meetings for years, every Thursday, to study the steel industry. Rank and file members of the local knows more about the steel industry than any politician.

At this point, the attendees were invited to join the discussion. The first speaker explained he was a member of a political party which matches the views of the assembly and he disagreed with Barb's characterization of parties as arbitrary. He strongly felt the co-op movement provided the template of an ideal economic order.

A local musician held that music corporations were dying but music was flourishing through modern communications and social media. He felt it was important to use the new communication tools to reach people.

A question from the audience was directed at the panel. Does Public Ownership still have a role to play? It was not directly answered as the panel picked up on the question of the role of political parties. Barb contented political parties exist primarily to form government and are tightly controlled with the leader vetting each candidate. She wants institutions which empower people. Stan decried the concentration of power in the hands of the leader such as in the Stephen Harper Party. What power do individual MPs or MLAs have?

Ellen said it was a myth that leftist do not know how business workers. She noted many business people belong to the NDP. She referred to the damage corporate tax cuts do to the economy and how corporation attempt to get small business to identify with the monopolies. She wants the NDP to have a wide sphere of politics and be inclusive.

The next audience member identified himself as a CUPE leader. He thought the event was "mind blowing". He stated we no longer talk to our neighbours or children about politics. He passed on CUPE's advice to shift our food buying habits 10% toward local producers as a practical first step to transform the community. When the coal miners went on strike in Ladysmith, they were all in the same boat. Now, we are each in our own world. We need to talk to our neighbours about the issues facing us, he concluded.

The next commenter began with a thank you to the organizers of the Memorial. He described how the people running the country hate democracy and are much more powerful than they were. There is no workers' social movement now and we need vision to create democratic changes. He put forward a three point program:

- 1) End any colonial references in our society
- 2) Implement the co-determination principle
  - a. All nations in Canada are equal partners
  - b. A role for workers in directing the economy
- 3) Mixed economic model
  - a. Industrial strategy
  - b. Democratic control of resources

He concluded by calling for participatory democracy, not just representative democracy, a call for new forms of democracy.

The next speaker talked about how he joined the picket lines at the Stelco plant in Hamilton. He was interested in the potential of the youth. He said their brains are moving very fast. We need to look at who they are and then slow it down, so they can understand our struggles.

Paul Manly, who was filming the event, noted how unions have economic clout but too often invest in privatisation, foreign takeovers of government services and big corporations. We must have ethical investing of Union funds, he insisted.

Barb noted the conflict between a capital (profit) orientated society and a human orientated one. Art, one of the musicians announce the forming of an International Workers of the World chapter for Vancouver Island. The "Wobblies" were a major force for social change at the time of Joseph Mairs.

A speaker noted the Left was out of sync with the times culturally. He spoke of the need for union structures suitable to organize young service workers. The next comment supported the youth, observing they are not cynical but realists when they eschew politics. No matter who is elected, he felt the appointed deputy ministers, in solidarity with the business community, run the government. He wants us to 'mainline' resistance, that is make resistance the central activity of people's lives.

Ken Hibert of the Joseph Mairs Memorial Committee summed up the discussion for the gathering. He wants to have other hear this discussion, people who do not have well formed political ideas. He noted the problem of preaching to the converted. The Committee has high hopes for the video documentary being made of the Memorial.

We may have many problems now but, if we were in Tunisia, we would be arrested just for having the Memorial, Ken continued. He noted the struggle in Tunisia was set off by a suicide, which he made pains to note he was not advocating. He observed in the last decade it has not been apathy that kept us from fighting but decisions made by The BC Federation of Labour during the attacks on hospital support staff and teachers by Gordon Campbell.

After the discussion, the assembly formed up for the procession to the graveside. Each person turned over the discussions in their mind as we solemnly walked to Joseph Mairs monument; a monument emblazoned with a slogan...

**"A Martyr to a Noble Cause, The Emancipation of his Fellow Men".**