

Address given by Alastair Haythornthwaite  
(*Chair of the Joseph Mairs Memorial Committee*)  
at the 2006 memorial

Brothers and Sisters

I want to welcome you all to this memorial for a young man, Joseph Mairs, who died just days before his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday in Okalla prison.

Joseph was one of many coal miners who struck against four coalmines in Nanaimo and Ladysmith in 1912.

Under the banner of the United Mine Workers of America, these men, many Scottish immigrants, fought for union recognition and the improved safety that would bring. The Ladysmith cemetery has many graves of those who were killed in mine accidents. Explosions and cave-ins were considered one of the inconveniences of doing business to Dunsmere and the other mine owners. Production might be halted for days, if not weeks. The lives of the men and the welfare of the miners' families never entered the shareholder's thoughts. Scottish miners arriving on the Vancouver Island believed they were making a better life for their families. Instead they found wages and working condition far inferior to those won by concerted labour action in Scotland.

In the wake of an explosion that killed 32 miners in Nanaimo in 1909, the United Mine Workers of America had been waging a concerted effort for union recognition on Vancouver Island with the formation of District 28 of the UMWA in 1911.

In 1912 a United Mine member, Oscar Mottishaw, reported dangerous levels of gas in one of the mines. He was fired and blacklisted.

In response, his fellow miner held a one-day strike on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1912. The companies retaliated with lockouts at all the mines and continued business with scab labour.

A year later, still on strike, the miners in Ladysmith had lost patience with scabs. Forming into to a large crowd, and arming themselves with stones and, yes, dynamite, they roamed the town driving out the strikebreakers and police from the town. For a couple of days, the strikers were the 'authorities' in Ladysmith.

The militia was dispatched stiffened with some heavy machine gun teams from the Seaforth Highlanders. No resistance was given and mass arrests followed. Joseph was one of many identified in that crowd and received a year in prison and a hundred dollar fine. In that dark fortress, he sickened and died for want of a doctor.

His fellow miners honoured his memory with the stone cairn where we will pay our respects to him today. That stone cairn is a tangible link between his day and ours. His day is past living memory, only word of mouth and stone can acknowledge to his sacrifice.

The Joseph Mairs Memorial Committee maintains a web site that has more history plus many images of the military occupation of Ladysmith. Please visit '[josephmairs.ca](http://josephmairs.ca)'.

The problems of safety in coalmines have made poor progress around the world and here in Canada. Antipathy to unions is growing, as employers no longer respect unions or certifications. These employers will not tolerate any restrictions to their dictate. Labour contracts are drafted by the company and presented with 'sign or else' threats. This is 'Our Common Condition'. The same struggle in which Joseph played his tragic role is the same challenge we face today.

We must organize changes in society to the benefit of the worker and fight to hold what has already been won. And we have to form a bridge for young people so that Joseph Mairs name and deeds will not be forgotten, but spoken of and respected.