

Keynote Address Given By Mordecai Briemberg  
At The 2006 Joseph Mairs Memorial

Thank you for welcoming me on this day of celebration of the life of Joseph Mairs, a young, immigrant, worker. I expected there would be people younger than I here, but it is wonderful that there also are so many young people in this room.

Sisters, Brothers, Comrades and Friends --- these are warm words which people, struggling together for the freedom and flowering of all humankind, use to greet one another, strangers though we may be.

These warm words are used to convey our feeling of mutual concern and trust. These warm words express the conviction we are connected by common fate. In these warm words is the recognition that only through our combined and sustained struggle can we progress toward our goal of universal freedom and the blossoming of human potential, in a natural world whose survival we cherish and protect.

With such understanding of these words, let me greet you as sisters, brothers, comrades and friends.

The way forward never is crystal clear until we are engaged in the struggle. Only the experience of struggles clarifies what we need to do, and how we need to do it. Limited as our capacities are by the conditions into which we all are born, it also is only by being engaged in struggle that we transform ourselves, discover and develop capacities that until then are hidden and stunted. Struggle not only changes the conditions in which we live, it changes us.

So participation of masses of people in struggles is not a mere means to changing the world. It is an end in itself – for in this participation we develop our capacities to analyze and solve problems, to initiate and create, to cooperate and to share.

It is this which appears to be happening today in a country like Venezuela – which is so encouraging to people around the globe. Contrast that with the sterile act of intermittent voting, which is equated in our society with

“democracy”, but where we ourselves neither change, nor do the basic conditions in which we live changed.

Near 40 years ago, in April 1967, in the midst of the Vietnam war, but in a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam”, Martin Luther King said these words – “the shirtless and barefoot people ... are rising up as never before. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. We in the West must support these revolutions.”

He went on to say, with his characteristic eloquence: “If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight ....” He was speaking to the people of the United States.

Think of young Joseph Mairs, on the cusp of World War 1, a miner locked in prison for his dedication to the cause of human emancipation, drained of his life in the cell, who – otherwise – might have been ordered to shed his blood in a distant land killing other poor working people. And for what? For the benefit of those who make wars for their own material profit.

Martin Luther King called militarism, materialism, and racism the “giant triplets” – from one boiling cauldron and always together. Profits, militarism, *and racism* always together.

Remember these epithets: “Krauts” in world war one, “Japs” in world war two, “gooks” in Vietnam, “ragheads” today. Then there is the commander of the Canadian military who vowed his young soldiers will kill the “scumbags” in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan. *Why* are we in Afghanistan? *Why* are we in Haiti overthrowing their elected government? *Why* is Prime Minister Martin shouting about waging war in Iran?

And what would Joseph Mairs have thought of all this?

When the Iraqi oil workers are sacrificing their lives to drive foreign armies out of their country, and campaigning to stop the privatization of their nation’s oil, would Joseph Mairs stand with them? Would he joint the wars

or stand with strangers who are yet his brothers, sisters, comrades and friends?

Just this month 14 miners were killed cutting coal in Virginia mines – for the reason that across the United States the government and corporations are reducing and eliminating safety standards. The same government that does this says it is making war in distant lands to bring the people their “freedom”. The same government claims it is devoted and doing everything to protect its people from terror.

What can you say about rulers who have such callous disdain for the lives of poor working people in their own country, and yet profess they are dedicated to bestowing “freedom” on distant lands? What can you say except: “liar!” and “hypocrite!”

These reapers of profit and rapers of the earth have no interest in the well-being of humanity anywhere. To think otherwise is to allow oneself to be manipulated by fear, by patriotism, and by clever slogans.

When 43 workers in the B.C. woods are killed in one year, and more than 110 seriously injured, again because of eagerness to maximize profit, and our government too spouts noble words about “freedom”, and mouths clever slogans about “humanitarian war” and the “responsibility to protect” as they send young Canadians to murder and die in Afghanistan, can we say the dynamic is any different in our country?

This is an occasion to honour Joseph Mairs, a time for reflection and rededication.

In 1945 a proud socialist by the name of Albert Einstein wrote these simple words: “Not until the creation and the maintenance of decent conditions of life for all people are recognized and accepted as a common obligation of all people and all countries – not until then shall we, with a certain degree of justification, be able to speak of humankind as civilized.”

And the major obstacle to the creation and maintenance of these civilized conditions for humankind?

That obstacle, as a Cambridge economist and reformer so pithily described it, is a system based on the “extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men, for the nastiest of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of all.”

The economist was John Maynard Keynes. The system he was describing is capitalism.

So it comes down to that clear, simple line in the old union song: “Which side are you?” Joseph Mairs gave his answer.