

Mayday in Blackball07

The Blackball Mayday Celebrations last weekend, hosted by the Blackball Museum of Working Class History Trust and Unions West Coast, as well as celebrating the ongoing workers' struggle, saw an important negotiation take place.

The celebrations began on Friday night when a choir entertained visitors and locals with songs from the union struggle.

On Saturday morning, a forum between the local unions and the Save Happy Valley Protestors, who have been trying to stop the Solid Energy open cast mine at Stockton, took place.

A gathering of fifty people heard the opposing arguments. The unions accepted that we are faced with pressing environmental issues, but pointed out that despite the West Coast having hosted extractive industries for 150 years, 80% of the land remains covered with native forest and that other regions are in much more need of ecological healing. Miners are highly unionized and well paid in a region which suffers from poverty. The tourist industry, on the other hand, is largely un-unionised and wages and conditions are poor. An issue on the Coast is the fragility of infrastructure and locals are resisting attempts to turn the area into a recreational park for urban dwellers. Coal is going to continue to be used in places like China for many years to come and it has to be cleaned up. The union side called for regional audits in terms of environmental and economic change.

The Save Happy Valley Protestors welcomed the chance to talk to the workers. It had been on their agenda since the beginning of the campaign, but had not yet happened. They outlined the history of their campaign. Their enemy was not the workers, but the company's arrogance, which they saw as a symptom of the neo-liberal framework that is currently despoiling the planet. Rather than sticking to coal, the Coast should be thinking of ways to make the transition to an economy without coal, something which is inevitably going to have to happen at some time. Global warming is an issue which we cannot ignore and the area to be mined is a valuable area of wetland. The tourist industry should not remain un-unionised and everyone should join in resisting the neo-liberal agenda. They had learnt that in protests such as they had been mounting, they should talk to the workers involved straight away.

The audience was then given the chance to respond. The local mayor saw the protestors as being young and naïve, the two MP's both spoke of the need to continue to use coal, and a tense moment arrived as a railway worker asked the protestors how they were going to help him when he lost his job in six weeks time, because of the effect of their protests. But at the end of the discussion the young people were congratulated on having the guts to front up and there were obvious some shared agendas between the two activist organizations.

After lunch the traditional march through town took place, with the Happy Valley People joining in. At the end of the march, plans for the celebration of the 1908 centenary were announced. These will take place at Easter, 2008.

From there the group went to Runanga Working Men's Club for the launching of the video: *That Fateful Day*, oral history accounts of the Strongman Mine Disaster. Once again a big audience turned out to take part in a moving event.

At night, a dinner saw a packed house at the Hilton, with after dinner speeches addressing the topic of "Whether socialism has anything to offer the NZ Working Class today". A full canvas of views resulted, from traditional "scientific" Marxism, to a union perspective of Government help to workers inevitably taking place through

collective ownership of resources, to the anarchist desire to move away from the state, to an honest confusion from someone mainly working in areas of globalisation. Matt Winter's mother's words remained with us afterwards:

Don't look back in anger,
And don't look forward in fear,
But look around in awareness.

The weekend's celebrations which ended in singing, the accompaniment provided by the Happy Valley people, left us all revitalized and hopeful. It was very important that this meeting had taken place; not only a meeting between activists whose different agendas can be used by the press to create divisiveness, but a meeting of generations. As Ged O'Connell summed up: We disagree on an important issue, but on other issues we're standing on the same side.

Paul Maunder