

ON LABOR DAY

Solidarity — Now, and Forever

In Tacoma, Ralph Chaplin's body may be 'mouldering in the grave' but his spirit is marching on.

By Don McIntosh

This Labor Day — like every Labor Day the last 18 years — a crowd will gather beside a gravestone in Tacoma to honor the man who wrote the words to "Solidarity Forever."

Solidarity Forever — sung to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic — is the most famous anthem of the American labor movement. Ralph Hosea Chaplin wrote it in 1915 after witnessing the bloody struggles of striking coal miners in West Virginia. At the time, Chaplin was a poet, writer and cartoonist for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) a radical anarchist-influenced union of miners and loggers.

Where the Battle Hymn says "his truth is marching on," Solidarity Forever ends its refrain with "the Union makes us strong." Today it's sung at union meetings, rallies, and on picket lines in the United States and other English-speaking countries.

Chaplin was one of the IWW's



Ralph Chaplin

leading lights, and was one of about 100 IWW members who went to prison under the Espionage Act of 1917 for opposing U.S. involvement in World War One. He was released after serving four years of a 20-year sentence, and went right back to labor activism.

Chaplin lived in Tacoma for the last decade of his life. There he worked as an archivist for the Washington State Historical Society and served as editor to the newspaper of the Pierce County Labor Council.

He died in 1961 and was buried beside his wife at Calvary Cemetery in Tacoma.

The annual graveside observance began nearly 40 years later, in 1999. It started with a pledge a local labor leader made to a dying member. Phil Lelli, the longtime leader of International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 23, promised Local 23 member T. A. "Tiny" Tronson he wouldn't let Chaplin's place in labor history be forgotten. That year and every year since then, the Pierce County Labor Council has sponsored the memorial. It features songs, stories, and the display of an artifact — a tin cup Chaplin scratched his name on when he was in jail on the Espionage Act charges.

"Foremost in our mind," says Labor Council secretary-treasurer Patty Rose, "is that he always stood up for workers in their struggle."

REMEMBERING RALPH CHAPLIN

- **Time:** 10:30 a.m., Monday, Sept. 4
- **Place:** 5212 70th St W, Tacoma, Washington (Entrance across from Meadow Park Golf Course on Lakewood Drive West)

Solidarity Forever

When the union's inspiration
through the workers' blood shall run,
there can be no power greater
anywhere beneath the sun.

Yet what force on earth is weaker
than the feeble strength of one?
But the union makes us strong.

CHORUS:

Solidarity forever. Solidarity forever.
Solidarity forever.
For the union makes us strong!

They have taken untold millions
that they never toiled to earn,
but without our brain and muscle
not a single wheel can turn.
We can break their haughty power,
gain our freedom when we learn
that the union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

In our hands is placed a power
greater than their hoarded gold,
greater than the might of armies,
magnified a thousand-fold.
We can bring to birth a new world
from the ashes of the old.
For the union makes us strong.

[Chorus]

— Ralph Chaplin, January 17, 1915

PAC/WEST 20th
Anniversary

Happy Labor Day!
Proudly serving Oregon Building Trades Council for 20 years.
www.pacwestcom.com