

Mother Jones

'The most dangerous woman in America' fought fearlessly for the nation's workers

You might have read the magazine named for her, but do you know who Mother Jones was and how she vigorously defended workers and inspired them to continue their struggles?

The story of Mother Jones, the petite woman who stood up to men in positions of power, is a reminder that America's labor history is messy, chaotic and violent. Advocating for workers, Mother Jones and other labor activists made great sacrifices and demonstrated intense bravery and determination for workers.

Mary Harris Jones became "Mother" Jones when the members of a railroad union she was fighting for gave her the nickname in 1897. But her fierce advocacy for social justice began much earlier.

Jones was born in County Cork, Ireland, sometime in the late 1830s though the exact date is not certain. When she was a child, her family immigrated to Canada to escape the Great Potato Famine. In 1859, Mother Jones moved to Chicago, IL, to become a dressmaker, and a year later she moved to Memphis, TN, and married ironworker and union activist George Jones, with whom she started a family. Exposure to yellow fever in 1867 took the lives of her husband and all four children. As with Jones's family, the victims were mostly the poor; the wealthy fled the city until the epidemic subsided.

Jones moved back to Chicago and opened her own dressmaking business catering to wealthy women. The contrast between her rich clientele and the poor of Chicago sparked her union activism.

"Often while sewing for the lords and barons who lived in magnificent houses on the Lake Shore Drive, I would look out of the plate glass windows and see the poor, shivering wretches, jobless and hungry, walking along the frozen lake front," Jones later wrote in her autobiography. "The contrast of their condition with that of the tropical comfort of the people for whom I sewed was painful to me. My employers seemed neither to notice nor to care."

She lost everything a second time in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. After the fire, Jones traveled around the United States as a full-time labor activist. In the 1880s she joined one of the country's earliest labor organizations, the Knights of Labor. The Knights sought to include people regardless of race or sex, and to unite both skilled and unskilled laborers.

As the nation's industries grew, Jones went from meeting to protest to strike in support of the workers who were making the growth happen but who got little for it. She hit her stride in the coalfields of Pennsylvania. In 1897, during a strike, the United Mine Workers were so impressed by her tenacity that they asked her to go straight to the workplace to sign up miners for the union. She traveled to mines, steel mills and textile factories to organize workers.

Adding to her union involvement, Jones advocated for child workers. She led a "children's march" of 100 child



Mary Harris Jones

workers in textile mills from Philadelphia to then-President Theodore Roosevelt's home in New York in 1903.

Jones tells in her autobiography how the children's march began. She went to visit striking textile workers in Kensington, PA, thousands of them small children:

The workers were striking for more pay and shorter hours. Every day little children came into Union Headquarters, some with their hands off, some with the thumb missing, some with their fingers off at the knuckle. They were stooped little things, round shouldered and skinny. Many of them were not over ten years of age, although the state law prohibited their working before they were twelve years of age.

The law was poorly enforced and the mothers of these children often swore falsely as to their children's age. In a single block in Kensington, fourteen women, mothers of twenty-two children all under twelve, explained it was a question of starvation or perjury. That the fathers had been killed or maimed at the mines.

I asked the newspaper men why they didn't publish the facts about child labor in Pennsylvania. They

said they couldn't because the mill owners had stock in the papers.

'Well, I've got stock in these little children,' said I, 'and I'll arrange a little publicity.'

A self-described "hell-raiser,"

Jones's activism came with many risks. She was often arrested, imprisoned, banished or threatened with violence.

In 1902, a prosecutor in West Virginia, where Jones was on trial for meeting with striking workers in violation of an injunction, pointed to her and said: "There sits the most dangerous woman in America. She comes into a state where peace and prosperity reign ... crooks her finger, [and] 20,000 contented men lay down their tools and walk out."

When striking coal miners faced men with guns, Jones was on the front lines urging them not to back down. She was imprisoned for several months following a strike in West Virginia in 1912, and held again, without charges, by the Colorado National Guard to keep her out of the mines there. On April 20, 1914, National Guard troops and private guns hired by the mine companies attacked a tent village of striking miners in Ludlow, CO, killing an estimated 21 people, most of them miners' wives and children. It was part of a larger conflict, known as the Colorado Coal-field War, that killed more than 100.

Jones was not in Ludlow during the massacre, but she used the violence to bring attention to the plight of workers, lobbying Congress, President Woodrow Wilson and even labor's archenemy, businessman and mine owner John D. Rockefeller, to improve the lives of miners and their families.

Jones describes her most famous quote in her autobiography, saying

Right: Mother Jones meets with President Calvin Coolidge.

Below: Mother Jones leads a march in Trinidad, CO, in 1910.



that she urged union members meeting in a church in West Virginia to go out to the coal fields instead: "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!"

Her words still inspire today. Cecil Roberts, president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and a West Virginia native, recalled those words when he gave a passionate speech at NALC's 70th Biennial Convention in Los Angeles, CA, in 2016. During the 1912 West Virginia strike, Roberts said, Jones used her status and stature—as a petite woman—to gin up the miners' courage.

"She walked around, and the miners and their families were living in tents," the UMWA president said, while the mine owners had brought men with machine guns to evict them. "Mother Jones surveyed all this, and she called for a rally. ... She first criticized the men as a bunch of cowards and said, 'You ought to let the women run this strike!'"

Jones continued to organize and protest for workers into her 90s until her death in 1930. She is buried in Union Miners Cemetery in Mount Olive, IL. Her legacy includes a foundation, museum and magazine named in her honor, all working to educate new generations about this remarkable, short, "dangerous" woman's life's work.

In the closing of her autobiography, Jones left us with a note of optimism:

In spite of oppressors, in spite of false leaders, in spite of labor's own lack of understanding of its needs, the cause of the worker continues onward. Slowly his hours are shortened, giving him leisure to read and to think. Slowly his standard of living rises to include some of the good and beautiful things of the world. Slowly the cause of his children becomes the cause of all. His boy is taken from the breaker, his girl from the mill. Slowly those who create the wealth of the world are permitted to share it. The future is in labor's strong, rough hands. **PR**