



One letter carrier is protecting and continuing the legacy of Mother Jones

David Lasley, a retired Branch 80 member, has been secretary of the Mother Jones Foundation since the early 1990s. He took on the role because, he said, “Illinois is rich in labor history.”

The Springfield, IL, organization was formed in the 1970s to preserve the legacy of Mother Jones, an influential labor organizer who championed the rights of industrial workers from the late 1890s until her death in 1930. (You can read more about her life in the June 2025 edition of *The Postal Record*.)

When the organization formed, its focus was to preserve her gravesite in the Progressive Miners’ Cemetery in Mount Olive, IL, which it continues to do more than 50 years later. Lasley called her gravesite “one of labor’s seven wonders in America.”

In the 1980s, the organization expanded its mission by providing labor history books for Illinois schools, which later evolved into promoting labor history education and supporting labor causes. It is made up of eight to nine members who meet once a month.

As the organization’s secretary, Lasley maintains records of motions passed at meetings, while most of the other responsibilities are shared among the members. Lasley described the group as “egalitarian,” adding, “There’s really no taskmaster ... everybody is self-directed.”

The main event of the year for the organization is the annual Mother Jones Dinner, which will be celebrating its 40th year this October. All the members of the organization work together to plan the dinner, with tasks informally assigned.

The dinner is held at Erin’s Pavilion in Springfield and typically hosts “anywhere between... 210 and 300” guests,

he said. Attendees include local union members, labor retirees, activists and supporters from the area.

Lasley said the event starts with cocktails before moving to the meal and a speaker. “At the end, we sing ‘Solidarity Forever’ and hold hands,” Lasley said.

Lasley is proud of the variety of speakers they have hosted each year, saying, “We decided that we would have labor activists, academics, organizers, and we’ve done that very well, I think.”

Guests have included Association of Flight Attendants-CWA president Sara Nelson; labor organizer, folk singer, storyteller and poet Utah Phillips; AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka; United Mine Workers of America President Cecil Roberts; labor and politics journalist and writer Hamilton Nolan; and NALC Communications’ Philip Dine.

Lasley says that the annual dinner is not only a fundraiser for the organization and a chance to see interesting speakers in the labor field, but also a time for unionists in the area to find community.

“You come, talk, find out that there’s other people like you,” he said, “and to have that kind of solidarity available, even if it’s just for a night, that has kept us going.”

Despite its small size, the organization has sustained decades-long programming and projects.

The funds raised through the annual dinner are used to support strike funds and labor organizing efforts, as well as to preserve and promote Illinois labor history. The organization has helped install historical markers across the state, including one marking industrial union leader Eugene V. Debs’ incarceration site in Woodstock, IL, markers explaining coal mining history at I-55 rest areas, and a marker honoring Henry



Clockwise from top l: David Lasley, Mother Jones, the gravesite of Jones, and a dinner held by the Mother Jones Foundation

Stephens—a Black labor activist who fought to allow Black miners to join the United Mine Workers of America.

Lasley noted that the organization has faced challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly in maintaining attendance and recruiting younger members.

“We’re all getting old,” he said, “We hope that Mother Jones and the Foundation can go on. The most challenging right now is the future, you know, is continuity and change.”

Looking ahead, Lasley expressed hope that the Mother Jones Foundation can be sustained by partnering more closely with the Illinois AFL-CIO or other labor institutions, ensuring that Mother Jones’ legacy and the broader history of labor struggles are preserved for future generations. **PR**