



Mother Jones

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

My folks were New Deal Democrats. They were convinced that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was doing all he could to help small farmers who were struggling financially even as my folks were. They listened faithfully to his fireside chats that carried the sense of his being a friend who cared about them personally. But his concern was not only for farmers; he supported workers' rights to unionize, a more controversial platform, and one that created large numbers of political enemies.

From the time I was little I heard stories about Aunt Jennie who stayed with us for extended periods of time, and how she adamantly refused to listen with my folks to the fireside chats. But as soon as he was finished, she would open the door and rage against everything FDR had said (for an old lady she had good hearing). She despised Roosevelt, accusing him of being a socialist or worse.

Long before FDR, however, there was Mother Jones. She was known best as a union organizer—a woman Aunt Jennie would have regarded even more odious than Roosevelt. Jones was alleged to be a hard-hitting woman especially by mine owners and industrialists. But her mission was to fight for men who were not being paid enough to feed and house their families. Too often women and children were forced to work in factories to make ends meet. The role for mothers, Mary Jones insisted, was in the home caring for children and seeing them off to school.

She had not had that opportunity herself. She was a widow living in Memphis with four little ones. Heavy rains in the spring of 1867 filled drainage ditches with stagnant water rife with mosquitoes.

Wealthy residents fled to their summer homes up north; others left to live with relatives out of town. Before spring was over all four of her children had died, while she remained to nurse the sick.

From Memphis, Jones moved to Chicago where she worked as a seamstress and set up her own dress shop. But everything she had was destroyed in the raging Chicago fire of 1871. Now she was determined to become a union organizer as her husband had been. Without any training, she effectively organized mine workers and was called “the most dangerous woman in America.”

Mother Jones was an unusual union organizer who rallied thousands of workers' wives to picket alongside their husbands and sons during strikes,

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sometimes also when the men were working inside the mines and factories. Indeed, she made the demand for higher wages and better working conditions a family affair, recruiting wives and children to “man” the picket lines. A man's pay profoundly affected the whole family. If a woman had to work, so did the children since childcare was nonexistent or impossibly expensive. Thus, child labor was commonplace. And that is where her outrage was aimed most fiercely.

In 1903, Mother Jones organized a children's march to Theodore Roosevelt's luxurious home on Oyster Bay Long Island to demand laws against children working in factories and mines. There were no immediate results but within a decade TR, as a Progressive leader, was strongly opposing child labor.

I could wish that Aunt Jennie would have admired Mother Jones, but unfortunately too often minds are closed and virtually nothing can pry them open. Mary Jones refused to allow devastating setbacks interfere with her commitment to children. They needed fathers who earned enough money to support a mother to care for them. Mother Jones was an angel of mercy, crowned with *tender mercies*. □

—Ruth Tucker