

Mother Jones Speaks: Collected Writings and Speeches

Edited by PHILIP S. FONER. New York: Monad Press, 1983. Pp. 724. Cloth, \$35. Paper, \$14.95.

The editor calls it "comprehensive," and that is as accurate a word as any: thirty-seven speeches or accounts of speeches, three pieces of congressional testimony, eight articles, eighteen interviews, 106 letters. Mary Harris "Mother" Jones was a remarkable woman who spent most of the last forty years of her one-hundred-year life as a United Mine Workers of America organizer. But I was ready to snooze through this one.

Not a chance. This collection works. It works because Foner has provided what is needed to understand and appreciate Mother Jones. Each speech is set in context; each document is followed by explanatory notes. The notes—almost as valuable as the documents themselves—identify and explain legislation, people, economic conditions, factional disputes, labor agreements, historiographical disputes, and other phenomena, important and ephemeral. Only a superficial index limits the usefulness of the book.

The collection works, too, because Foner, like his subject, enjoys confrontations. Foner takes exception to Dale Fethering's 1974 characterization of Jones as a rabble-rousing "gadfly" lacking ideological depth or commitment (page 23). He also rebukes the feminist historians, including Priscilla Long and Susan Estabrook Kennedy, for their "narrow approach" to Jones's lifework and for giving only one side of Jones's views on women, women workers, and the suffrage movement. Foner also criticizes modern scholars of socialism such as Linda Gordon and Mari Jo Buhle for failing to recognize Jones's place in that movement.

My own view—informed largely by this collection—is that Jones was deeply suspicious of the ability of the working class—men as well as women—to understand what was happening to

them under capitalism, let alone act intelligently on that understanding at the ballot box. She was, in short, wary of democratic politics. Woman suffrage would likely mean only more voters to be "hoodwinked" (page 492). Perhaps because so much of her time was spent in the male world of the coalfields, she had difficulty taking much interest in women as workers. She was a "mother," but of "boys" only (page 226).

In this and other ways, Jones was a nineteenth-century figure. Born in 1830, she was suited to an age when the good guys and the bad guys stood out—"I like an open enemy," she once said (page 397). She was at her best delineating the contrasts between the workers and their oppressors, whom she liked to associate with "poodle dogs" (page 457). But Jones also understood that the twentieth century was ushering in a new style of labor-capital relations and that this new style would render the enemy increasingly intangible. Her speeches contain a primitive notion of what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci would label "hegemony." Like Gramsci, Jones knew that capitalists were gradually and successfully blunting the edge of conflict. They were diffusing radical energies through an apparatus of ostensibly harmless institutions and mechanisms, including churches, Sunday schools, the YMCA, the Salvation Army, the National Civic Federation, philanthropy, and the press. Jones tended to conceptualize women as child-rearers not because she had some outmoded definition of gender roles, but because she believed that only as full-time mothers could women carry out the socialization necessary to produce an aware and nonviolent working class. For the same reason, she saw herself less as an organizer and agent provocateur than as an educator, whose function it was to keep the enemy visible in an age of

public relations, collective bargaining, mediation and arbitration, and modern labor relations.

Those interested in Illinois' labor movement will find little here. Jones focused her energies on West Virginia, Colorado, and other states that proved more resistant to UMWA organizational efforts. Even the letters to John H.

Walker, President of the Illinois Federation of Labor, seldom deal explicitly with Illinois events. Hopefully this will not deter potential readers, for this is a rich, revealing, and superbly edited collection.

WILLIAM GRAEBNER
State University of New York-Fredonia