

BOOK REVIEW

Mother Jones Speaks

Collected Speeches and Writings

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This volume offers a broad sweep of the activities and viewpoints of Mother Jones from her speeches, articles, interviews, letters, and testimony before congressional committees. The material, gleaned from unpublished and published sources, effectively conveys the duration, diversity, and intensity of her activities at the price of some repetition. A lengthy introduction places the collection in historical perspective and substantiates Professor Foner's praise of her effectiveness as a labor organizer and her special relationship with children, women, and southeastern European immigrants. It also affords him an opportunity to accord her life and activities the attention they deserve and to point to her consistent advocacy of socialism and the rights of women which some writers overlook because of their focus on adherence to the Socialist Party of America and the women's movement. In particular, he berates some feminist historians, more severely than necessary, for their neglect of Mother Jones and their inaccurate depiction of her as uninterested in women workers and unwilling to cooperate with other women in her activities.

Mother Jones organized and aided many types of workers, but the coal miners—"her boys"—received special attention, and she advised them to unite against the operators and their political allies. Her grassroots approach made her suspicious of professional labor leaders, and she condemned John Mitchell for collaborating with capitalists and John L. Lewis for personal aggrandizement while praising the more idealistic Martin Irons and John Walker for their fearlessness. On the other hand, she portrayed John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Woodrow Wilson sympathetically and worked within the AFL. Her emphasis on the personal rather than the organizational aspect provides a partial explanation. For example, she campaigned for Senator Kern rather than Eugene Debs in the Election of 1916 because Kern freed her from jail and aided the West Virginia miners, and she revered Terence Powderly, a longtime friend, although historians criticize his record as leader of the Knights of Labor.

Mother Jones led labor struggles throughout the country including coal and steel strikes in Pennsylvania. In 1899 she came to Arnot to aid coal miners and she contributed to their victory. She led a "children's crusade" in 1903 as several hundred juvenile textile workers marched from Philadelphia to New York City to dramatize the evils of child labor and stir support for national child labor legislation. A Westmoreland County coal strike in 1910 led her to join another battle against the operators and the constabulary and to advise the coal miners to unite and struggle under the banner of the United Mine Workers of America. Her agitation climaxed in the Steel Strike of 1919 when she condemned the steel centers for denying civil liberties and advised all workers to stand like the men of '76 in the face of violence and prison.

Her struggles in West Virginia and Colorado highlighted her career. The West Virginia miners suffered from low wages, unsafe mines, and company houses and stores. External economic control reinforced by a company-dominated political system and Baldwin-Feltsguards increased their exploitation. Nevertheless, her agitation, oratory, and organizing ability unionized Paint Creek by 1903, but the rest of the state remained unorganized. The expiration of the Paint Creek contract in 1912 set the stage for renewed conflict as evictions, imported strikebreakers, and more company guards triggered the violent Cabin Creek-Paint Creek Coal Strike of 1912–13. Mother Jones demonstrated her endurance by walking many miles and her courage by confronting the barrels of machine guns. The miners responded with militant strike activity and votes for the Socialist Party as had their counterparts in Westmoreland County. Mother Jones suffered imprisonment in West Virginia and Colorado, but her oratory and agitation continued. Colorado miners faced powerful absentee owners, payment in script, and cheating in the weighing of coal. When the miners struck in 1903 she joined the battle and condemned the settlement negotiated by John Mitchell which abandoned the miners of Southern Colorado, many of them Italians. When the struggle resumed in 1913 she returned and demanded justice and unionization although she faced the militia and imprisonment.

These struggles belong to working class history and lore, but her support for the Mexican Revolution has received less attention. Mother Jones organized support and raised money for Mexicans jailed in the United States for fighting the Diaz dictatorship, and she drew a parallel between their treatment and the plight of the victims of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. When she visited Mexico in 1921 to address the Pan-American Federation of Labor, she received an outpouring of affection from workers and trade unionists of all persuasions. Ironically, conservative labor groups in Mexico greatly influenced her, and she praised an organization for its advocacy of industrial freedom which engaged in secret cooperation with the United States government to maintain the status quo.

This valuable compilation offers a comprehensive picture of the activities and ideas of Mother Jones. It clearly establishes her important place in the American protest tradition and reinforces her reputation as an organizer, agitator, and speaker. She stood for labor solidarity, repeatedly counseled against bickering, and attempted to mediate between the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers in Colorado. The subservience of labor leaders in the National Civic Federation drew her condemnation, but she also had doubts about the Industrial Workers of World for its neglect of political action, spasmodic activity, and lack of patience. She concurred with the latter's call for industrial unionism but saw a need for growth and education prior to its realization and the inauguration of industrial freedom.