

At a Public Meeting in Charleston

Mary Harris (Mother) Jones

Commentary

For all the philosophizing about the best approach to achieve labor's goals, at the heart of the labor movement was always organizing and maintaining the zest of laborers for labor's cause. The history of the labor movement in the United States was bloody. The Haymarket riot of 1886, the Homestead strike of 1892, the Lattimer, Pennsylvania, massacre of 1897, the Ludlow, Colorado, massacre of 1914 were but some of the clashes where laborers died defending their right to strike. Maintaining solidarity in the face of physical and economic threat was a primarily oral task. Organizers for the unions needed to stiffen the resolve of their members under attack and turn their pain into support for the job action.

Few labor organizers were as effective in their task as Mary Harris "Mother" Jones (c1830-1930). Although the year is disputed, Mother Jones was born in Ireland. Her grandfather had been hanged by the British during one of the frequent Irish uprisings, and her father had fled to North America in 1835 after another. She grew up in Toronto, Canada. After graduation from normal school (focused on training teachers), she moved to Chicago where she worked as a dressmaker. She moved to Memphis to teach school, and there in 1861, married George E. Jones, an iron molder and a strong supporter of the Iron Molders Union. She became a strong supporter of her husband and his labor views. Then in 1867 tragedy struck: her husband and their four children all died within days in a yellow fever epidemic. She moved back to Chicago, went back into dressmaking, only to have everything she owned perish in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Without means of support, she wandered into a Knights of Labor meeting and found a sense of fraternity with the laborers gathered there. She became an itinerant, traveling wherever labor disputes broke out and talking to the men. Now approaching fifty years of age, the workers began calling her "Mother" and she accepted the persona, telling them their mother knew what was best for them and that their mother would never abandon them. She bonded with the common worker, staying with them during strikes, and often finding herself on their side at odds with union leadership.

After 1890, Mother Jones became particularly involved with the coal miners and their labor struggles. She became an organizer for the United Mine Workers (UMWA). She was also involved in socialist politics, helping to found the Social Democratic party in 1898 and the International Workers of the World in 1905. She resigned as a UMWA organizer in 1904 to become a lecturer for Debs' Socialist party of America. During this time, she continued to show up at miners' strikes in the Southwest. In 1911, she left the Socialist party employee to return to the UMWA as a organizer.

Now near 80, Mother Jones went to the coal fields of West Virginia in 1912 during the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek strike. She had had an active year, organizing in the coal fields of Colorado, speaking in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York, being expelled from the Socialist party, visiting Mexico to work toward peace with the revolutionary government there.

In April 1912, the operators in the Kanawha coal field refused to renew the contract with union miners. The miners struck. Most of the companies settled, but those on Paint Creek held out. The mine owners brought in several hundred guards from a detective agency to protect the mines. They evicted striking miners from company towns and the miners set up a tent city. Violent clashes between miners and guards increased with at least fifty killed.

On the sixth of September Mother Jones led a march on the state capital in Charleston. The speech was recorded by a stenographer and is reproduced here courtesy of the George Selden Wallace Papers in the West Virginia and Regional History Collection at West Virginia University, Morgantown.

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This great gathering that is here tonight signals there is a disease in the State that must be wiped out. The people have suffered from that disease patiently; they have borne insults, oppression, outrages; they appealed to their chief executive, they appealed to the courts, they appealed to the attorney general, and in every case they were turned down. They were ignored. The people must not be listened to, the corporations must get a hearing.

When we were on the Capitol grounds the last time you came here, you had a petition to the Governor for a peaceful remedy and solution of this condition. The mine owners, the bankers, the plunderers of the State went in on the side door and got a hearing, and you didn't. (Loud applause.)

Now, then, they offer to get a commission, suggested by the mine owners. The miners submitted a list of names to be selected from, and the mine owners said “We will have no commission.” Then when they found out that Congress, the Federal Government was going to come down and examine your damnable peonage system, then they were ready for the commission. (Applause.)

Then they got together — the cunning brains of the operators got together. What kind of a commission have they got? A bishop, a sky pilot working for Jesus; a lawyer, and a member of the State Militia, from Fayette City. In the name of God, what do any of those men know about your troubles up on Cabin Creek, and Paint Creek? Do you see the direct insult offered by your officials to your intelligence? They look upon you as a lot of enemies instead of those who do the work. If they wanted to be fair they would have selected three miners, three operators and two citizens – (cries of: “Right, right”) – and would have said, “Now, go to work and bring in an impartial decision.” But they went up on Cabin Creek — I wouldn't have made those fellows walk in the water, but they made me. Because they knew I have something to tell you, and all Hell and all the governors on the earth couldn't keep me from telling it. (Loud applause.)

I want to put it up to the citizens, up to every honest man in this audience — let me ask you here, have your public officials any thought for the citizens of this State, or their condition? (Cries of: “No, No, No.”)

Now, then, go with me up those creeks, and see the blood-hounds of the mine owners, approved of by your public officials. See them insulting women, see them coming up the track. I went up there and they followed me like hounds. But some day I will follow them. When I see them go to Hell, I will get the coal and pile it up on them. (Loud applause.)

I look at the little children born under such a horrible condition. I look at the little children that were thrown out here, —

Now then, let me ask you. When the miners — a miner that they have robbed him of one leg in the mines and never paid him a penny for it — when he entered a protest, they went into his house not quite a week ago, and threw out his whole earthly belongings, and he and his wife and six children slept on the roadside all night. Now, you can't contradict that. Suppose we had taken a mine owner and his wife and children and threw them out on the road and made them sleep all night, the papers would be howling “anarchy.” (Cries of: “Right,” and loud applause.)

When you held a meeting the other day down here at Cedar Grove, the *Mail* said that evening that you were drunk. I want to say to the *Mail*, it was a lie of the blackest dye. (Loud applause.) There was never in the State of West Virginia a more orderly, well-behaved body of men than those miners were that assembled at Cedar Grove. The militia were there to see that we were sober, and we were before they came, and we were sober when they went away. The *Mail* never told you, when the mine owners and their gang of corporation pirates met at the Hotel Ruffner and filled their rotten stomachs with champagne and made you pay the bills. (Loud applause.)

Now, then, the State of West Virginia is the only state in the union, — I have spoken in every state in this union, and in every city, I have spoken. When I got on the train at Charleston last Sunday morning to go up to (The speaker tried to remember the name of the place but could not) that has been clamoring for me since I came into the field — the militia at Pratt got instructions to jump on the train and go to Deepwater and find instructions there. They got on the train and went up and got instructions, and followed me up. They got an Irish _____, [omitted by the stenographer], when I was taking coffee, to watch me, for fear that I might slip away from them. The rat that stood there wasn't worth noticing because a man won't do those things.

Well, when I got off the train at Lively, I understood those men had to walk fourteen miles in the hot sun to keep me from talking. I want to tell you something. The mine owners nor Glasscock, haven't got enough militia in the State of West Virginia to keep me from talking. (Loud applause.)

When I found those men I looked them over. I found out they were working men. If they had been some of the big guns, you bet your life I would make them walk. I would make the fat get off their rotten carcasses. But when I surveyed those boys I said, “Boys, I want to tell you, this is a fourteen miles walk, it is a bad, rough road, and to keep you from walking that distance in the baking hot sun I will refrain from going.” They said the boys can go, the men can go, but an old woman with her head white eighty years old can scare hell out of the whole state, and she can't go. (Loud applause.)

Shame on your manhood! If these operators were true, and if they were not thieves, they

would not be afraid of anybody. (Cries of: “No”).

But when they plunder from these miners, these children, my fellow citizens, countrymen, thrown out on the highways and mothers insulted, — do you think that they will be good citizens when they grow up? I don’t. The revenge and resentment will be buried there if they grow into manhood, it will develop, they will kill, they will murder to get even with those who robbed them. I want you to stop that. I don’t want it to go on. Your Governor may, but I don’t. I want the children to have the best of influence, I want the children to have good schooling, I want women to know nothing but what is good, I want to leave to this nation a nobler manhood and greater womanhood. Can I do it? No, I can’t, boys, with the administration you have got, I can’t do it.

(Cries of: “We’ll change that.”)

I can do it if you men and women will stand together, find out the seat of the disease and pull it up by the roots. (Cries of: “Yes, yes, yes.”)

Take possession of that state house, that ground is yours. (Some one interrupted, and the speaker said: “Shut your mouth.”)

You built that state house, didn’t you? You pay the public officials, don’t you? You paid for that ground, didn’t you? (Cries of: “Yes, yes.”)

Then, who does it belong to? Then why did the militia chase you off? You have been hypnotized. The trouble has been that they wanted the slave system to continue. They have had a glass for you and your wives and children to look into. They have you hypnotized. They want the ministers to tell you when you die you will have a bed in heaven. The blamed chambermaids might be on a strike and we wouldn’t get a chance to get a bed. (Loud applause.)

Now, then, I will go to the tents and when those poor women, — I have seen those little children, — my heart bled for them, — and I thought, “Oh, how brutish the corporations must be!” God Almighty, go down and look at those conditions! Go see those miners! They tell you about how much — they have a list of questions up here, “How much do the unions do to train the miners to clean the yards.” Did you ever know of such a damned, silly insulting question? (Loud applause.)

I want to ask those fellows that put that down, “How do you suppose, when we have to fight you, we have got any time about yards?” You have got the yards. We clean them for you and you don’t thank us for it. Your wife lives in style. Look down at those houses there on the river front. She dresses with the blood of children. She buys a dog and calls it “Dear little poodle, I love you.” And you stand for it! And you stand for it! And you are a lot of dirty cowards, I want to tell you the truth about it. You are a lot of cowards and you haven’t got enough marrow in your backbone to grease two black cats’ tails. If you were men with a bit of revolutionary blood in you, you wouldn’t stand for the Baldwin guards, would you? (Cries of: “No, no, no.”)

No, you wouldn’t. Or Glasscock either. When they saw you were going to clean up the guards they got the militia down and they don’t allow President Cairns, of the Miners, to go up Cabin Creek. They don’t allow Mr. Diamond to go up. But I want to ask you if the militia does allow the mine owners to take transportation up there? They do? (Cries of: “No transportation.”)

You know as much about it as a dog does about his daddy. (Loud applause.)

I have been under martial law before, I have been in states where martial law was, but it was never carried to that extreme. We were at least allowed to go and visit our people. Here in West Virginia you can't go. You can't hold a meeting. I want to say to you that the right of free speech will be carried on if they hire all the militia in the state to murder us. We won't surrender that right. We will hold meetings. We will hold peaceful, law-abiding meetings. We will hold them all along. I have here a book, if I had the light to read it, one of the most damnable documents that those mine owners are sending out for the miners to sign.

I have got letters here from the slaves on the Norfolk and Western, “For God s sake, Mother, come up and do something for us.” I have got letters from the Fairmont region, “Oh, Mother, for God's sake, come and do something for us.” I have them from New River, “For God's sake, come and do something for us, and help us.”

Isn't there something wrong? Say, boys, stop it. For ages and ages and ages they have kept the lash on you. I could see it the day I went to Kaymoor. The poor devils were scared to death. I had to tell them to come with me. They were afraid of the bloodhounds. And while I talked the bloodhounds sat there. They made me wade the creek.

Now, every citizen will admit that when you rent a house the landlord has a right to give you a passageway to go to that house. You have a right to invite who you please to your table, haven't you? The bloodhounds came along and you have got to get out.

Now then, is that something that the State must boast of? Is that something that you citizens will endorse? (Cries of: “No, no.”)

Very good, then. They will come to you on election day. I will tell you when you can carry a bayonet and they can't meddle with you. You can carry a bayonet on November 5th, and you can go to the ballot box and put a bayonet in there and stick it to their very heart. (Loud applause.)

Then they can have no militia. (Cries of: “Won't they steal the ballots?”)

They will not steal it if you do your duty. I would like to see the corporation bloodhounds steal my ballot if I had one. I would clean them up. He would go to the machine shop for repairs and he wouldn't come out in a hurry when I got through with him. (Loud applause.)

You fellows with the corporation hump on your backs, I hope you will.

Now, I want to say this: Ten or twelve years ago when I came in here, you had to work eleven or twelve hours, didn't you? (Cries of: “That is right.”)

They made you load coal for any price they wanted. We brought on a fight and got twice that for loading coal. We reduced the hours to nine. Up there on Paint Creek and Cabin Creek you obeyed the laws at that time. You had a good union at that time, but you have done in industrial unions as they do elsewhere, you elect the man that wants the glory instead of the man that will work for you. I am going to put a stop to that. I want to tell you we are going to organize West Virginia. I am going to stay in here until you have good officers. And you will have

no officer that will get a detective from the sheriff to go up Paint Creek with him. By the gods you won't.

I don't want an escort that murders my brothers on Piney and Stanaford Mountain. I don't want an escort to go with me. And you elect them to office, those contemptible murderous blood-hounds. I am protesting. I am speaking against the insults, I want to tell you that. I don't do anything behind anybody's back. What I do I will do openly, straight above board. I have knocked down your officers before, and I will knock them down again. They will play no double game when I am around. I have just as bitter feeling toward them as toward the Baldwin guards.

Another thing, when you elect a committee, elect men that can go to the superintendent and talk like men.

Another thing, I want you to do, boys. You have got a contract with the Kanawha companies, and I am responsible for closing those mines these days. I want to say to you, Go back peacefully, law-abiding, leave drink alone. When we have won this battle we will all get a “jag.”

Go back to work. Those men have their contracts made outside and they are losing them. We have been upsetting their deal. I want to deal fair with every man. There are some good operators, some good men, but their hands are tied. We must not bust them up in business, as long as they are going to give us a hand and help us, we will help them. Go back like men and go to work. One operator said, “Mother, I have had to throw away six contracts.” I don't like that. I am not very fond of mine owners as a rule, but there is a sense of justice everywhere. I want you to help the men that have stood by us — stand by them.

I will be in here until the next officers are elected. I am going through the whole district and I will pick the men and I will openly advocate them. If they are not the fellows I want I will throw them down just the same as I would a Baldwin guard.

I am going to say to the police, the militia, the Adjutant General, and to every one in this audience, that we will carry on this fight, we will make war in the State until the Baldwins are removed. (Loud applause, and cries of: “Right you are.”)

Vote for Tincher for Sheriff, I say this to all of you.

Another thing I want to say, there is a rumor gone out that you miners tore up the C. & O. track. I know it is not right, but it has gone out that way. I know who tore the track up. But the papers all through the country put it on the miners — the whole gang of thieves, all the other papers in the country, outside of *The Labor Argus*. I want you to guard the C. & O. tracks and trains everywhere. The young men on the C. & O. are our men, and they are working to help us, and I want you to protect their lives. Don't meddle with the track, take care of it, and if you catch sight of a Baldwin bloodhound put a bullet through his rotten carcass. (Loud applause.)

Now, I want to tell you, boys, we will not bother the C. & O. Road.

I want to say another thing. There is another man who travels the C. & O. Road, I asked him some time ago to go up to Huntington. He has been going to speakings. He went up. I was going down that evening, and all the coaches were full, and I was worn out. The express manager

as well as this brother and I went into the Pullman car and took a seat and sat down and talked the whole way. No, he did not go watching me. I invited him, but I wouldn't invite the bloodhounds to go up to Kayford with me, or Eskdale. His name was Cochran.

The sheriff offered me an insult that I am going to resent. (Cries of: “Tell him about it.”)

I don't allow any of those bloodhounds to watch me as I travel.

He travels up there, and I have known him for twelve years. He is a pretty good fellow.

But the other bloodhound used to be up on the C. & O. and on New River trailing me like a dog. Somebody told me up on the creek who it was.

Boys, this fight is going on. I may have to call on you inside of two weeks again to make another move. Then I will get the police with me, and I will have them all educated by that time. (Loud applause.)

Now, I want to say, my friends, I have only one journey to go through this life; you have only one journey to go through this life; let us all do the best we can for humanity, for mankind, while we are here.

That is my mission, to do what I can to raise mankind to break his chains. The miners are close to me. The steel workers are. I go among them all. One time when I took up the Mexican question, I went to Congress to save some lives; I had never seen them in my life, but they appealed to me and said, “It is up to you, Mother, to save our lives.” I went up to carry the matter to Congress. It came up before the big committee. They were Dalzell, Congressman, representing the Steel Trust — he was chairman of that big committee; Smith, representing the Southern Pacific Railroad, was a member of that committee; Champ Clark also was a member of that committee. Dalzell said to me, “Mother Jones, where do you live?” I said, “In the United States, sir.” “What part of the United States?” said he. I said, “Wherever the workers are fighting the robbers, there am I.” (Loud applause.) “Sometimes I am in Arizona fighting the Southern Pacific blood-sucking pirates and thieves,” said I. “Sometimes, I am up on the Steel Range, fighting those murderers and plunderers, sometimes I am in Pennsylvania fighting the robbers and murderers and blood-suckers there, and by the Eternal God we will clean you up and put you out of business.”

Now, my brothers, don't violate the law. Let them see that you are law-abiding.

Now, the *Mail* said that I was going to speak tonight. Yes, I did. The *Mail* said it supposed I was going to ridicule the Governor, and the Salvation Army. I never ridicule. Never in my life. I never will. I criticise the Governor, but I do not ridicule him.

Another thing I do to my people, I show them how the Salvation Army came into existence. It was a necessity for capitalism. When it developed machinery, capitalism began to develop, an oligarchy of Wall Street began to reach out, and it had to have a Salvation Army to work on the workers' brains and keep them contented. I am a student of those things. I find out the cause that produces things. I am not fighting the Salvation Army. I do at times show how the Salvation Army, the church and every other institution becomes commercialized in the age in

which we live. I do not ridicule them. They are in a way to do good work. I do not approve of them for I know they are capitalistic in their make-up.

When the *Mail* or any other paper says I ridicule them I want to state it is false. I always show up to the workers how they are hypnotized, and I don't care whether it is the Salvation Army or the church or the Bishop on this Commission, or not.

The selection of this Commission was the three wings of capitalism. There is no wing of the workers on that Commission. From the questions they ask it is a plain truth that they understand nothing of your disease or trouble, and have never made it a study.

Now, then, my brothers, I am not going to be muzzled by the *Mail*. I have been assassinated by the slimy pig before, but it never made me retreat. I have measured steel in the middle of the night with the bloodhounds, but it never made me give up the red flag. I tell them we are in the fight to a finish.

Now, my brothers, I want you all to return home, peacefully, law-abiding. Go home. I don't mind you taking a drink, I know you need it. I don't belong to the temperance brigade at all. As long as liquor is manufactured it is going to be sold for profit. When you take the profit out of it, just as you have out of the postage stamps, then you don't need any temperance howlers. It will be made pure, and we will drink it pure. So the temperance brigade will keep in the back ground. If we want a drink we will take it, and we are not going to offer any apology for it.

Be good. Mother is going to stay with you. I am going to Colorado. There was a sheriff in the county, and the mine owners asked for the troops, and the sheriff said, “You can send no troops, no militia, into the county I have charge of. The men elected me.” He was the sheriff, and he did not allow the Governor to send the troops in there. There was no tyranny in that county. Once and awhile we licked a scab, we wanted to put brains in him, he had none. That sheriff is going to run for Secretary of State, and I am going out to sweep the state with him. I will put him into office, if it is the last thing I do. I want to put in all the officers, and we have got to put out the fellows who stand with the robbing class, and we have got to put them out of business, we have got to make an honest nation. You can't be honest today. A girl goes to school, to church, and prays to Jesus. One Monday she acts like the devil when she sells to you. The whole machinery of capitalism is rotten to the core. This meeting tonight indicates a mile stone of progress of the miners and workers of the State of West Virginia. I will be with you, and the Baldwin guards will go. You will not be serfs, you will march, march, march on from milestone to milestone of human freedom, you will rise like men in the new day and slavery will get its death blow. It has got to die. Good night. (Applause.)