

Sana Cheema
GSURC Paper
Honors 3250

Mother Jones: Most Dangerous Women in America or Just a Mother?

Abstract:

Mother Jones, also known to many as Mary Harris, was an extremely influential labor and community organizer during the late 1890s to early 1900s. She was often labeled as “the most dangerous woman in America” (Merithew, 2002). Most of her work was done for labor workers and their rights. I explore how Mother Jones became such a prominent leader during a time period in which women had little to no value. I will concentrate on gender and see how Mother Jones used her women power to achieve success but also at the same time see if gender kept her from reaching true success. I would also like to see what lasting impact she left on labor rights and if being a mother figure helped or harmed her image. I want to explore just how hard it was during the time of War and Depression for a woman to organize labor movements. Did Mother Jones show women that it was okay to step into a man’s world or was she a receiver of harsh criticism by the opposite sex herself?

Key Terms: Depression, Labor Rights, Women, War, Dark Times, Injustice, Labor Strikes, Gender, Working Conditions

Introduction:

During the last two decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the poor in the United States were suffering. While the rich and wealthy were lounging around lavishly,

most of America was heading towards the Great Depression. The poor were suffering while the wealthy did not care for the labor conditions in the late 1890s. During this harsh period and even a worse period to come the public of the United States of America needed a leader who would fight for their rights against the rich and stand with them shoulder to shoulder. People were in a desperate need for jobs therefore they needed a strong leader to advocate for their rights. This powerful leader was found in a middle aged frail women, who barely reached five feet tall, who took the country by storm and became an angel of sorts to the helpless public of America. This essay will look at the role of Mary Harris in the labor union as a women and how she changed how people looked at women and their leadership abilities in the 20th century. I argue that Mary Harris Jones not only helped improve rights for labor unions but also helped put women on the front lines of strikes.

Just like many millions of Americans, Mary Harris migrated from Ireland to the United States with her parents while still a child (Canavan, O'Mahony, McNamara. 2013). Ireland's economy fell because of the Great Famine, which caused a hunger breakout, that led to millions and millions of people leaving the country and Mary's family was one of them. "The Harrises, like hundreds of thousands of others, were Famine immigrants, desperately poor" (Gorn, 2014). In She originally went to Canada and then relocated to Chicago in her early twenties (Gorn, 2014). She tried her hand at teaching and dressmaking while in Chicago and Memphis (Tonn, pg 1). In Memphis, she worked as a teacher and later married George Jones, a man who was a unionist as well as an iron molder (Canavan, O'Mahony, McNamara. 2013)." "He was a skilled worker, a union man, an iron-molder, in an era when there was high demand for heavy industrial goods, boilers, rails, freight cars and the like, especially with war" (Gorn, 2014). Unfortunately, Mary Harris Jones did not live a simple and happy life and was struck by tragedy like most

people of the time. Six years after her marriage, her four children and her husband succumbed to the yellow fever epidemic in 1867 (Canavan, O'Mahony, McNamara. 2013). Mary Jones tried to pick up the pieces of her life so therefore she moved back to Chicago and started dressmaking for the wealthy women of the Chicago society with a partner (Gorn, 2014). Unfortunately, once again tragedy struck and Jones lost all she had in the 1871 Great Chicago Fire. "Her life - famine, plague, and fire - was biblical in its tragedy" (Gorn, 2014). Time and time again she was hit by one tragedy after another but she refused to bend. These ups and downs in her life gave her a reason to join the community of the Knight of Labor and this is where she stopped being Mary Harris Jones and took up the title of Mother Jones. To prove my argument, I will be exploring the labor conditions of the 19th and 20th century and the rise of labor unions. I will then give a short biography of Mother Jones and how she became such a huge persona while also looking the problems she faced. In the end, I will explore how she brought women on the front lines and how she also used her womanhood to achieve her title and her lasting impact on people.

Panic of 1873:

During the time in which the title of Mother Jones was given to Mary Jones, the United States and the American people were suffering greatly. The late 19th century and the early 20th century dealt many blows to the workers in the United States with the final blow being the Great Depression and its after effects. The start of this cycle was done by the Panic of 1873 which was a direct result of industrial capitalism. The panic was formed through financial crisis that were effecting much of America as well as Europe. "Since the start of the 19th century there were various stock market and bank panics in Europe and North America, some of which had important effects internationally, particularly the collapses of 1825, 1837, 1846/47, 1857 and

1866.” (Marichal, 2014). Panics such as these foreshadowed the first great depression that would befall in 1873.

The banking firm Jay Cooke and Company went out of business and they were the main expenditure providers for the federal government (Blanke, 2010). Money coming in and out of Europe, especially Germany, stopped because of the economic system downturn which stopped the flow in money. The stop of money caused the closing of many banks that at the same time caused a huge fall to the US economy because in reality 10% of the US population ran the country, so they were the ones who had to close down factories. The closing of factories and firms led to many job losses, reduction in railroad construction, bankruptcies and other economic falls in various parts in America. Downturns in the American economy during these times had a domino effect which effected Europe as well. “The news of an impending slowdown in the international economy was quickly transmitted by the underwater telegraphs cables that had recently linked Europe with North America.” (Marichal, 2014) As a result trade between Europe and North America dropped significantly which in return gave rise to many labor unions. The unemployment rate became went up which led to numerous of strikes all over America and also the shutting down of many big enterprises. One in every eight people were unemployed and the ones who held jobs were faced with wage cuts.

Rise of Labor Unions:

Civil unrest and violence was the effect of the Panic of 1873. People became restless and mostly the poor were suffering while the wealthy were still living lives that were untouched by the financial crisis. Protests and strikes were being demonstrated all over the United States. There was a sudden cut in the railroad expansion which was on a boom for quite a while. Railroad workers were the first one to be laid off The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 was one of the first

strikes that was a result of pay cuts. It was the first strike to take place in the US and lasted a month. "President Rutherford B. Hayes was forced to send federal troops to more than a half dozen states to stop the strikes. In the end, the fighting between strikers and troops left more than 100 people dead and many more injured." (GPB, 2013) Workers that were being laid off and the ones that were being treated unequal had no where to turn. The life of a typical laborer in the US during the time was absolutely soul shattering. Panic was on the rise so the workers had to turn to someplace to find solace and right their worlds that had gone wrong and the workers got this in the form of labor unions. Poor working conditions, wage cuts, safety measures and the economic depression were some main factors that gave rise to labor unions such as Knights of Labor and American Federation of Labor.

The Knights of Labor, the union that Mary Jones joined, was established as a result of the panic. It was established by Uriah Stephens in 1869 but the most prominent and important leader of the organization was Terence V. Powderly. The Knights of Labor advertised an eight-hour workday, equal pay for equal work and an end to child labor as the organizations main priorities and demands. The Knights of Labor organization became so popular because they were accepting of all workers no matter what skills they possessed, both males and females as well as black workers.

On the other hand, we had the American Federation of Labor, a much more formal organization than the KOL's secretive agenda. American Federation of Labor was much more radical than Knights of Labor and also was formed at a later point by socialists. The American Federation of Labor advocated higher wages and improved working conditions (Shmoop, 2008). While the Knight of Labor were against strikes, the American Federation of Labor supported strikes as a way to achieve its goals (Shmoop, 2008). The American Federation of Labor also

supported a certain type of skilled workers for the organization unlike the Knights of Labor. The labor workers now had organizations that they could turn to in order to participate in strikes and get their problems heard and resolved. The Panic was the cause of poor working conditions in the end of the 19th century.

If the Panic of 1873 was bad, then the start of the 20th was no different but was however even worse. “The start of 20th century brought even more harsh labor conditions. By the 1900s, the American workforce averaged at 24 million registered workers aged 10 and up and 19% of the workforce were women which was an increase from what the percentage was at the end of the 19th century.” (Fisk, pg. 1) The closing of the 19th century gave a push start to labor unions while the 20th century brought wage increases and such, up to the Great Depression. Child labor was also seen in the 20th century. Children aged 10 to 15 made up a huge portion of workforce to provide for their families in the harsh conditions and the after effects of the Panic (Fisk, pg.1). The working conditions during the 1900s were harsher than any other century. No laws were in place to protect workers so death was a common end to the laborers in the process of production. Death was expected on the job and it was a risk that people were willing to take in order to earn money and support their families. “The two most infamous industries known for their high fatality rate were railroading and coal mining, in which half of all the workers died.” (Lebbergott, pg. 5)

Unions rose in the 20th century but often workers had to leave the union because members in the union were often subject to scorn, by employers, and were denied jobs that were available. For example, families were starving so men were often torn between keep working in the harsh conditions to provide for their families or starving them in hope of change:

The husbands had no desire to desert their fellow unionists, but the wailings of hysterical women, the pinched faces of hungry children and the prospect of being homeless were too much for some of them, and they returned to work. The strike was broken, and although a stubborn attempt was made by the union to regain lost ground, the effort was useless. The spirit of the men was broken. The untried unionists who had clamored for a strike and expected to win in a canter, became discouraged (Machinist, pg 30).

As time went by and with the fatality rate of workers in the job, children as young as ten and women started working in factories and mines (Fisk, pg. 6). Labor laws were being made but they were really not that effective and were often ignored by factory owners who continued to employ women and children (Fisk, pg.6). Factory owners often saw children and women as cheap labor and were more prone to giving them a job. Even in the 20th century changes were being made but not at a rate that should have taken place. Factories were very dangerous with a no regulation by the government on the state or federal level. "By 1900 industrial accidents killed thirty-five thousand workers each year and maimed five hundred thousand others, and the numbers continued to rise." (Gale, pg. 47) These continuous harsh conditions were the reason for many workers joining unions and going on marches and strikes. People like Mother Jones helped workers feel accepted in the unions and provided support and strength they needed to fight a long and hard battle.

Mother Jones as a Labor Organizer:

When Mother Jones was working as a dressmaker in Chicago, she often saw the poor being neglected while the rich were simply unfazed by the working conditions. She saw how the rich treated the poor so her resentment for social and labor inequality increased. "Some labor leaders, like Mother Jones, reported seeing masses of destitute families in urban environments even before the panic." (Barge, pg. 2) After losing all her belongings in the Great Chicago Fire,

Mother Jones turned to a Knights of Labor shelter for help and realized that change was needed for the happiness of the American people in the difficult time. “At minimum, this history of survival tempered her disarming courage and cultivated a prickly independent streak which took form in her notorious insubordination and maverick unionism.” (Tonn, pg.1) After Mother Jones joined the Knights of Labor, she brought a complete different prospective to the labor unions. For the first time a little old lady, who barely reached five feet, was on the front lines of strikes and was urging people to fight for their rights. Before, labor strikes often ended in bloody battles and police interference but Mother Jones urged people to stay put and fight for equality.

From 1870 to 1920, Mother Jones was known to be a hell raiser of an organizer and a dangerous woman on the front line of strikes (Horsely, 2008). She stayed with Knights of Labor for a while and during that time she gave many pro strike speeches to keep strikers engaged in getting their rights. She also went to many coal mine strike sites to motivate the workers as well as participated in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Mother Jones was almost always seen in her signature outfit that became her symbol in a way. “Typically clad in a black dress, her face framed by a lace collar and black hat, the barely five-foot tall Mother Jones was a fearless fighter for workers’ rights.” (AFL, 2016)

A group that appealed to Mother Jones the most were the miners. During the end of 1880s, Mother Jones joined the United Mine Workers or UMW and started to encourage many mine workers to join the union and advocate for their jobs and wages. “She did not win all of her strikes, but she was the most prominent and successful organizer of the United Mine Workers, which in the early twentieth century was Americas largest and most successful industrial union” (Gorn, 2014).

Jones was also a huge advocate of child labor and laws so often went to sites that had child workers in order to organize strikes for an end to it. She was seen as a savior of kids and helped make many changes because children were close to her heart as stated in this 1916 article in the *Machinist Monthly Journal*:

To our Mother Jones belongs riches that shall not be worm eaten or cankered. The riches of human love, freedom, liberty and righteousness. Upon these the glorious illumination of all the stars shall center their radiance. And through the golden rays far away in the future children will be shown a kindly picture of our comrade and worker, Mother Jones (*Machinists*, 1916).

In order to help the children at the time with labor laws, Mother Jones began by organizing a children's crusade in which children working in mills and such marched from Philadelphia to New York to demand that President Roosevelt protect them. Mostly kids that worked in factories did so out of family obligations in which the father had passed away and they were struggling to survive. The result of this was children that had many parts of their bodies cut off by factory machinery and Mother Jones could not bear to see this. Mother Jones continued to work as a labor organizer through the rest of her life.

Problems Mother Jones Faced:

Despite being so famous and loved by some workers, Mother Jones was also not a stranger to rejection. As a labor organizer, Jones was required to travel to different cities, towns, and states therefore not every door was open to her. "Old Mother Jones has been on the ground for two weeks, but Saturday, we understand, the Governor ordered her to be taken to the State line, and ordered her not to return." (*Machinists*, 1916). She was often criticized by lawmakers and courts which resulted in her being barred from many cities in America. Some women also criticized Mother Jones because they saw her as not an advocate for women but an advocate for labor

rights. This was seen in the state of Colorado where Jones was extremely criticized by women as well as the lawmakers. For example, after her arrest in the state she was seen as being totally different than the women living there:

Block states: The women of Colorado are taking no stand on behalf of Mother Jones, because women do not unite as a sex where the class struggle is involved. Mother Jones is a militant fighter, not for woman's rights, but against labor's wrongs. There can be no mistake about where she stands in the terrible battle between exploited workers and exploiting owners. The middle and upper class women of Colorado have absolutely nothing in common with her. They are as far apart as the poles. There is no more of a bond between her and the wives and daughters of the mine owners and other capitalistically-minded women, as women, than there is between Eugene V. Debs and William H. Taft, as men (Block, 1914).

This was because Mother Jones was against the suffrage movement because she did not support women voting. This did not mean that she was against women but because she believed that change did not need to be made by a vote but instead could be made by the will to be a "hell raiser" like she was. This thought made many women go against her especially upper class women such as the ones in Colorado.

Mother Jones was also subjected to many different controversies that ultimately resulted in an arrest and sentencing to twenty years in prison by a military court. Whenever there was violence at a strike scene or march, fingers were often pointed at Mother Jones. In June of 1912, at a strike in West Virginia, violence broke out and martial law was placed in effect. Mother Jones was arrested on charges of attempt to murder which resulted in a twenty-year prison sentence that was later pardoned after a mere eighty-five days. Criticism was no stranger to her. If workers loved Mother Jones, there were also those who could not stand the site of her. She was often also stamped with harsh labels that were an effort to destroy her image. For example, a

rumor had surfaced that Mother Jones was a keeper of an ill fated house in Denver (U of Illinois Press, pg. 236).

Brought Women to the Front:

In the late 19th and early 20th century, women were sort of outsiders in society (Gorn, 2008).

Women in general were expected to stay at home and were not really expected to be a part of strikes and riots. Strikes were supposed to be for men and women were supposed to stay at home. However, the depression brought out the worst of people and there wasn't a us and them because poverty made everyone the same. Most people were unemployed so women were expected to help out. Through Mother Jones and her labor advocating, most women in a way looked up to her. She had that gentle tone that provoked them to fight for their rights just as any other man. Mother Jones was a woman herself and an elderly one but she was actively involved in multiple strikes. "Most American women of that era led quiet, homebound lives devoted to their families. Women, especially elderly ones, were not supposed to have opinions; if they had them, they were not to voice them publicly—and certainly not in the fiery tones of a street orator." (Gorn, 2001) This fact alone motivated other women to be just as involved on the frontlines of strikes. In one of her marches, Mother Jones addressed women directly:

She stated: "I long to see the day when labor will be in the White House and in the halls of Congress," and "we'll take the mines and run them for ourselves, rather than starve." Her key message was for the women. She advised them to organize independently of the men, to defy their husbands and fathers if necessary, to deny miners access to the home if they weakened, and to "shorten their skirts and march." (Feurer, pg 29)

This is why she is often known as one of the most prominent labor leader because she had a way of persuading people with her wit, intelligence, look, and talk. Her speech ability was one that appealed to all those who listen to her. Men were also accustomed to seeing her at strikes so they

also became much more open to the thought of other women joining the unions as well. Mother Jones opened the door for women in labor unions. Women who were coming out to work and even advocate fair and equality in the workforce were kind of reserved about joining strikes that were mainly full of men. Seeing another women standing on the stage and telling them to fight motivated women as well as made them comfortable while participating in marches and strikes.

Motherly Instincts:

Women all over the world are born with motherly instincts. What is a mother? A mother is a caring individual who raises a child with love and care as well as teaches them to do the right thing. Mothers represent a child's bond to the world and the understanding of it (Smith, 2011):

While parents' roles can be reversed, more often than not, children are going to view dad as a knight in shining armor who will keep them safe and chase away fears, while mom is the primary source for comfort and care. As a child grows and matures, the mother -- whether biological or a stepmother -- plays an important role in her child's development, character and attitudes (Smith, 2011)

Our genes are comprised of a need to love and care for children as well as other family members such as husband and relatives. God has created a woman in such a way that her love and affection is not bound by an age limit or a time period. When a child is in a difficult position the person that he most often looks toward for comfort is his mother. The relationship between a mother and child has no boundaries.

Dangerous Woman or Just a Mother:

A US District attorney labeled Mother Jones as the “Most Dangerous Women in America” but this title was incorrect. Yes, Mother Jones had a way of speaking that made everyone around her stop and listen but she was far from dangerous. Mother Jones was nothing more to miners and

workers than a mother, a mother of sorrow (Tonn, pg 6). Grown men were even subjected to giving up at a certain point during the strikes but seeing an elderly women giving them support was often enough to carry them on further in their quest for justice. She was often known to miners her “boys” and had the look of an elderly grandmother who was amazing at storytelling which captured the attention of her “boys” and made them listen to their mother (Tonn, pg. 9). Her low tone sweet voice and her attitude of protection appealed to people of all ages and of both genders.

Men are often closest to their mothers so seeing a white haired old lady in the strikes and advocating the fight for equality and rights touched their hearts and compelled them to listen and obey her. She often scolded workers and also cajoled them just like a mother would. After going through horrible conditions in their workplaces, workers, especially miners, were in need of a little love and support so who better to offer that then Mother Jones:

Because coal-miners were entrapped within a patently paternalistic system, they already functioned, in one sense as “children”. Moreover, by keeping miners subservient through fear and isolation, and near starvation, owners had unwittingly increased their emotional hunger, which made them particularly susceptible to maternal nurturing and protection that was offered by Mother Jones (Tonn, pg 6).

Mother Jones therefore was a reminder to many of a home away from home. Seeing a little old lady on the worker’s side, reminded them of their own families and what they were fighting for. Often in war, even soldiers get tired and lose sight of the end so the workers were no different. Days and days of marching and striking with no result left them with lost hope. However, when the sight of Mother Jones and her sweet melodic voice touched their ears, the workers were once again reminded of what they wanted: a happy family that was well fed, comfort and support of

loved ones, and a content life. This excerpt from a poem written about Mother Jones perfectly describes the way people saw her:

“They listen each man seeing his mother in her eyes and their dead children peeking from her skirts. The smoke of supper trails across the valley and the men feast on her words. They turn home with full stomachs” (Eve, pg. 9)

All these were some of the images that were presented by Mother Jones therefore it was hard for the workers not to feel a connection with her.

Use of Motherhood to Create an Image:

Before entering labor unions and organizing strikes as a labor organizer, Mary Harris Jones was just a plain old widow who had no one in the world. She was living alone in a huge world with no husband, kids, or even relatives as a matter of fact. She had lost everything in the tragedy of life so how did she become a mother to thousands and thousands of people? Why did people even listen to a plain old widow? Women, old and young, are found everywhere in the world. Some who are poor, some who are rich while others are famous and others unknown to the world. What made Mary Harris Jones transform into Mother Jones, a mother not just to one but thousands of people?

When she came to the Knights of Labor shelter, Jones was in dire need of help herself. Her compassion however of helping other workers like herself was the first step to create an alter ego of herself. She was a middle aged women with a sweet round face and a soft voice in an atmosphere of disparity. Just like women everywhere out there, Jones used her image as a woman to reach out too many people. Her image as a mother helped Mary Jones reach the height of success at what she did. Unions saw her ability to appeal to workers, miners, children and

women therefore used that to recruit many more members for the unions. The persons in-charge of labor unions were often men who were well off so it was hard for them to get workers to leave their jobs and join the union as well as go on strikes. Leaders, at the time that Mother Jones joined the union, saw her ability to rile up the crowd and the effect she was having and they liked what they saw. Mother Jones was the perfect spokesperson for different unions and she as well as the leaders of the unions knew this. Therefore, her charm, femininity, grace, and use of words were all compiled together to form a persona of a mother. Who better to move people to want change than a person like their own mother?