

The Irish and the American Labor Movement

In the 1840's the great Famine devastated Ireland and sent hundreds of thousands of immigrants to America. Most of the Irish settled in industrial cities where they were subject to many casualties. They labored at backbreaking jobs, lived in overcrowded tenements, were practically owned by company "bosses" and their children were deprived of an education because they had to toil in mines and sweatshops. Irish Americans had become masters of their destiny through the revolts against the old regime of labor cruelty and child labor. Many Irish-Americans such as the Mollie Maguires, Terence Powderly, and Mother Jones changed the course of the American labor society forever.

One of the earliest revolutionary groups Irish Americans were the Mollie Maguires. The Mollie Maguires was a secret, inside ring which controlled the lodges of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. They appeared in the U.S. in 1852. The Maguires opposed the draft of the Civil War, were important factors in local politics, and murdered and maltreated mine owners and bosses throughout Pennsylvania. The men whom the Mollies picked as their victims were often cruel and callous bosses who exploited the miners on every opportunity.

Miners were often paid by the amount of coal they produced. Miners were forced to live in company homes and buy groceries at a company store. Children were employed in the breaker room where they separated slate from coal and broke up the larger lumps. The Mollie Maguires became the means by which the miners could carry out their outrage against such working conditions.

The mine operators decided to strike back, so they hired the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The agency chose a young Irishman named James McPharland who changed his name to McKenna and went to Pottsville, Pennsylvania to begin his work. McPharland was accepted by the Irish mining community. There he acquired specific names and addresses of the members of the Mollie Maguires. Finally, a railroad conductor discovered he was a detective and McPharland left town and took his evidence with him.

Nineteen men were hanged for their crimes and others received long jail sentences. The Molly Maguires lost much of their influence and never again were an important part of the Irish coal mining community in Pennsylvania. The Mollie Maguires influenced the labor movement by proposing change. Even though they were on the violent side, they clearly let the "bosses" know that change would have to take place for them to continue working. They gave the labor movement its first push into action and gave warning that drastic changes will take place.

The most noteworthy of all Irish-American labor leaders was Terence Vincent Powderly. He was born in Carbondale, Pennsylvania to Irish immigrant parents. Powderly was a railroad worker at the age of thirteen and later became a machinist. In 1871, he joined the Machinists' and Blacksmiths, national union and soon became its president.

Three years later, Powderly joined the secret organization called the Knights of Labor. The Knights developed into the largest and most influential force in the American labor movement. Powderly then rose to the head and was given the title "Grand Master Workman." He held this position from 1879-1893. Under Powderly's direction, the Knights of Labor reached their peak of power in 1886 when the membership totaled one million. As working conditions became more harsh, the organization faltered along with the entire labor movement. At the turn of the century, the movement had gotten stronger with the

appearance of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). No longer a dominant figure in the labor movement, Powderly spent his last years working for the AFL.

An exceptional and effective Socialist woman union organizer was an Irish woman named Mary Harris Jones, also known as "Mother Jones." Mother Jones had a great impact on the labor movement in America. She was born in Cork, Ireland in 1830 and came to America in 1835. She married George Jones who was a member of the Iron Moulders Union and an organizer for the Knights of Labor in the southern and southwestern coal fields. In 1867 yellow fever struck the Jones's and all four children and their father died. The death of George Jones gave Mary the burning desire to continue his work in the union. In 1882 she took part in her first coal strike in Hocking Valley, Ohio. But her deepest interest was in taking part in the struggles of the United Mine Workers of America. It was a vigorous and rapidly growing union that was what made Mother Jones a labor leader.

Before Mother Jones' actions, mine workers were subject to fourteen hour work days and the companies owned everything, from the miners, shacks and stores right down to their churches. The companies even believed that they owned the miners.

From the beginning of her involvement in the union until she was almost one hundred years old, Mother Jones was where the danger was the greatest. Crossing militia lines, spending weeks in damp prisons, unconcerned under the wrath of governors, presidents and coal operators, she helped organize the United Mine Workers with the only tools she ever used, "Confidence and a voice."

She led the miners in strikes in Virginia in 1891, in Paint Creek and Cabin Creek, West Virginia in 1912-1913, in Ludlow, Colorado in 1913-1914, and in Kansas in 1921. She organized women to persuade scabbing men into joining the unions and fought against corrupted leaders and operators when they were blocking progress.

Mother Jones developed a tactic that later became her trademark. She organized men and women to take the union pledge. The wives and men rose and pledged themselves to see that no one went to work. The mining company at Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania tried to bring in scabs while miners were on strike. Mother Jones, the miners' wives, and housekeepers marched up to the mine and scared the scabs and mules away. After the procession, the women conducted a round-the-clock patrol of the mines. Jones convinced the wives of local farmers to support the strike and not to scab.

In these and other strike incidents, Mother Jones was able to utilize the element of surprise by having the miners' wives step out of their traditional roles as housewives. They were able to cause company gunmen and strikebreakers to panic by surprising and confusing them. Although some Socialist men resented the prominence that Mother Jones had achieved during her marches, most of them admired and respected her tireless activity and her bold hatred of child labor.

The Irish immigrants who emigrated to America to seek a better life found hardships and abuse from companies and bosses before and in the beginning of the twentieth century. Workers began to revolt and demanded change. The Irish took an adamant position in enforcing the revolutionaries' powers, and even took part in organizing revolts of their own in Irish dominated work places. Without the influence of the Irish in the labor movement in the U.S., history would have been so much different.

(written by Natasha Gayle & originally printed in 1993.

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