

Who Was Mother Jones?

Grades K-6.

Curriculum Connection: Community, Work, Labor Movement, Progressive Era, Child Labor

Show your students these photographs of social activist Mary “Mother” Jones. Use the background material at the end of this activity whenever you think it will encourage students to ask more questions and think more about Mother Jones.

The first photograph was taken in Ludlow, Colorado, during the 1914 miners’ strike. Mother Jones is with a miner’s family in their camp. The third photograph shows Mother Jones leading the miners to confront the governor of Colorado in Denver. The others have no more information, except that they are connected to her labor movement activities.

For younger students, consider giving them a few minutes to look at all the images and then say, “The woman in these photographs was called Mother Jones. Tell me what you think she was like and what kinds of things you think she did.” Another option is to show the pictures one at a time and discuss each one in order to build a picture of Mother Jones.



[“Mother Jones with the Miners' Children” \(1912\)](#)



[“Mother Jones and 600 Miners Marching to the State Capital at Denver, Colorado” \(1914?\)](#)



[“Mother Jones Marching in Support of Labor Rights, Trinidad, Colorado” \(1913\)](#)



[“Mother Jones” \(no date\)](#)



For older students, have them write quick notes about what they think each image shows. Then, after they have viewed all the images, ask a series of questions. Possible questions are listed below.

Potential Questions

- What do all the images have in common?
- What do you think about the older woman in the first photograph when you first saw it?
- Did you recognize the same woman in later photographs? What is she doing in each photograph?
- As you viewed the different photographs, did your idea about who she was change?
- What kind of information do these sources give you about the labor movement / the Progressive Era?

Background

Mary “Mother” Jones was born in Ireland in 1837. As a child, she saw people starving in the potato famine. Her family was forced by the famine to move to Canada, where Mary grew up and was educated. She left home as a young woman and, right before the Civil War began, she married George Jones. They had four children. But in 1867, a yellow fever epidemic killed her husband and four children. At the age of thirty, she went to live in Chicago, opening a small dressmaking shop that was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. She then lived in poverty until the last years of the 19th century. And then she created “Mother Jones.”

She started wearing old-fashioned clothes and exaggerating her age. She declared she was the mother of all who were poor, all those who suffered because of poor working conditions. She fought against child labor and for the rights of all working people. She spoke out loudly and fiercely against injustice, and people paid attention to her. She became one of the most famous and best-loved figures in the labor movement in the United States.

Additional Resources

- [“The History of Mother Jones”](#) on MotherJones.com
- [“Mother Jones”](#) on AFLCIO.org
- [“Mary Harris Jones”](#) on National Women’s History Museum site