

MOTHER JONES FOR THE MINERS

Mary Harris "Mother" Jones was a fiery Irish immigrant who took up the cause of miners. She helped organize strikes for better conditions and pay, and fought against child labor. In 1903 her efforts took her to Colorado. This is a condensed excerpt from her autobiography.

The state of Colorado belonged not to a republic but to the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, the Victor Company and their dependencies [other companies]. The governor was their agent. Whenever the masters of the state told the governor to bark, he yelped for them like a mad hound.

The people of Colorado had voted overwhelmingly for an eight-hour work day. The legislature passed an eight hour law but the courts had declared it unconstitutional. Then when the measure was submitted directly to the people, they voted for it with a 4,000 votes majority. But the next legislature, which was controlled by the mining interests, failed to pass the bill.

The miners saw that they could not get their demands through peaceful legislation. That they must fight. That they must strike. All the metal miners struck first. The strike extended into New Mexico and Utah. It became an ugly war. The metal miners were anxious to have the coal miners join them in their struggle.

The executive board of the United Mine Workers was in session in Indianapolis. The board asked me to go to Colorado, look into conditions there, and make a report.

I went there immediately, first to the office of The Western Federation of Miners where I heard the story of the industrial conflict.

I then got myself an old calico dress, a sunbonnet, some pins and needles, elastic and tape and such sundries, and went down to the

southern coal fields of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company.

As a peddler, I went through the various coal camps, eating in the homes of the miners, staying all night with their families. I found the conditions under which they lived deplorable. They were in practical slavery to the company, which owned their houses, owned all the land, so that even if a miner did own a house he must vacate whenever it



pleased the land owners.

They were paid in scrip [paper certificates] instead of money so that they could not go away if dissatisfied. They must buy at company stores and at company prices.

The coal they mined was weighed by an agent of the company and the miners could not have a check weighman to see that full credit was given them. The schools, the churches, the roads belonged to the Company. I felt, after listening to their stories, after witnessing their long patience, that the time was ripe for revolt against such brutal conditions.

Mother Jones' account goes on to tell how miners in part of the state won some improvements through the strike. But in other areas they were defeated by mine owners using violent tactics. Her work helped bring attention to the need for better labor laws to protect workers.

Group Discussion: *What does Mother Jones say was the political situation in Colorado that made it difficult to create a state law setting an eight hour work day? What practices did the mine owners use to keep an unfair advantage over workers?*