CRUSADE FOR CHILD LABORERS: "MOTHER" JONES AND THE MARCH OF THE MILL CHILDREN

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A FEW spirited citizens during the Progressive era waged a vigorous campaign to eliminate the evils of child labor. This struggle drew into its ranks social critics and reformers who represented a variety of political philosophies. Conservative Senator Albert J. Beveridge, Republican from Indiana, labored to force through remedial legislation and declared that child labor in America was "too hideous to be true." Feminist Florence Kelley publicized the issue North and South by delivering hundreds of speeches to women's clubs and church groups. Socialist John Spargo, of a more radical persuasion, wrote that children in many factories were "kept awake by having cold water dashed on their faces" during long hours of toil.¹ Then in 1903, in perhaps the first protest of its kind in United States history, Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones dramatized the evils of child labor by leading a march of factory children from Philadelphia to New York.

By 1900 "Mother" Jones was well-known as an ardent supporter of crusades to ameliorate the suffering of the working classes. Born in 1830 of a poor laboring family at Cork, Ireland, Mary Harris immigrated to Canada as a child and was educated in the common schools of Toronto. She prepared for a teaching career but also became a proficient dressmaker. She taught briefly in a convent at Monroe, Michigan, but moved to Chicago to open a dressmaking shop because she "preferred

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sewing to bossing little children.” Despite this sentiment, in 1861 Mary Harris returned to the classroom when she accepted a position at Memphis, Tennessee. There she was married to an iron worker whom she described as “a staunch member of the Iron Moulder’s Union.” Her husband and four children perished in 1867 when a yellow fever epidemic swept Memphis. “All day long, all night long,” she recalled in her Autobiography, “I heard the grating of the wheels of the death cart.”

Mary Harris Jones was thirty-seven years of age—and all alone—when once again she moved to Chicago and obtained a job in a dressmaking shop. The machine which she operated was near the windows, thereby allowing the young widow to contrast the extravagance of the aristocrats of Lake Shore Drive with the poverty of the lower classes. Every day she saw “the poor, shivering wretches, jobless and hungry, walking along the frozen lake front.” The wealthy, who might have alleviated the misery of the masses, seemed oblivious to their destitution; Mary Harris Jones was not. When the Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed the dressmaking shop, she was left without employment but free to become better acquainted with the struggles of the poor and of organized labor.

While in Chicago she began attending the meetings of the Knights of Labor, an organization founded in 1869 to assist skilled and unskilled workers in their battle against wage-and-hour slavery. There were strikes and boycotts, riots and conferences, a few victories and many defeats. But the spirit of the laborers inspired the widow Jones and provided her with a cause célèbre. She became increasingly involved in the bitter industrial warfare of the late nineteenth century, and she was especially active in the United States Mine Workers of America, whose members knew her as the “Joan of Arc of American labor.”

In 1903 “Mother” Jones left the coal fields of West Virginia to bring encouragement to 100,000 textile workers on strike in the Kensington district of Philadelphia. Strikers in Kensington

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2 Mary Harris Jones, Autobiography of Mother Jones, edited by Mary F. Parton (Chicago, 1925), 11-12.
3 Ibid., 12-13.
4 United Mine Workers Journal, October 29, 1903, 1; and Jones, Autobiography, 13-16.
were demanding better working conditions, including a fifty-five hour week. Leaders of the American Federation of Labor praised the strike as a “splendid movement for more time to live, more time to love, and more time to enjoy their freedom.” But on June 5 the Philadelphia Inquirer reported that child labor had suddenly become a major issue. A trip to the state capital at Harrisburg by Chief Factory Inspector John C. Delaney to organize deputy inspectors for the affected area further publicized the problem of child labor.

“Mother” Jones arrived in Philadelphia on Sunday, June 14, and promised to remain as long as her services were needed. She was appalled by the fact that at least 10,000 of the strikers were children, whose emaciated and deformed bodies were shocking—“some with their hands off, some with the thumb missing, some with their fingers off at the knuckles. They were stooped little things,” she observed, “round shouldered and skinny.” Many of the children were just ten years old, in spite of the 1903 Pennsylvania child labor statute which prohibited the employment of children under thirteen years of age. Statistics concerning the unlawful employment of children were staggering. In 1901 there were 1,161,524 children officially enrolled in the schools of the Keystone state, but average daily attendance was only 847,445. Where were the other 314,079 children? “Mother” Jones knew where they were—at work in mill and mine.

State factory inspectors who were supposed to assist in law enforcement usually chose to ignore abuses. The Pennsylvania inspector reported 647,747 employees in the factories of his state in 1903, but claimed only 32,758 of these were children. In his report for 1904 he categorically denied that Pennsylvania factories were “literally crowded” with children under thirteen as reformers charged. He admitted, however, that there were

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8 Philadelphia Inquirer, June 5, 1903, 6; American Federationist, Vol. 10, No. 7, July, 1903, 578.
9 Philadelphia Inquirer, June 5, 1903, 1; June 7, 1903, 1.
7 Ibid., June 12, 1903, 1, 4; June 15, 1903, 11.
8 Jones, Autobiography, 71.
many children who, "because of their physical deterioration as a result of their employment, or for physical deficiencies the result of other causes, appear to be an age less than thirteen." "

Journalist Kellogg Durland reminded readers of *Outlook* magazine that "while North and South Carolina, Alabama, Texas, California, Oregon, New Jersey, and New York were actually reforming their laws, Pennsylvania was indifferently delaying all [child labor] reform. . . . Flesh and blood" of little children, he presumed, "are at present deemed cheaper commodities than iron and steel." " Labor Department agent William S. Waudby declared: "Take . . . Pennsylvania, with its laws and its officers to enforce them—how recreant to their trust have they proved. . . . Little girls at the age of 12 were paid from $1.80 to $2.10 per week. . . . What sort of mothers will these conditions bring forth?" At the First Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia the Reverend George D. Baker insisted that "there is something wrong in the social order which permits the working in the mills of . . . children sixty-five hours a week." "Mother" Jones agreed.

In mid-June the fighting spirit of the textile workers was high. Prominent labor leaders like John Mitchell of the United Mine Workers and Socialist Eugene V. Debs were either in Philadelphia or reported as planning to visit the strikers in the near future. Conferences, meetings, and public gatherings had created a solidarity rare among industrial workers of that era. It was therefore possible for "Mother" Jones to turn from her customary role as an inspirational "Joan of Arc" to an active crusader against child labor. She had no difficulty finding support. On June 17, two days after her arrival, hundreds of textile workers led by machine-mangled and deformed children conducted a "monster" parade through the streets of Philadelphia. They carried signs which read: "We Want to Go to School" and "A Full Dinner Pail and an Hour to Empty It."

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" *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 22, 1903, 11.

" *Ibid.*, June 15, 1903, 11; June 18, 1903, 1, 2.
The highlight of the “monster” child parade was a speech by the seventy-three-year-old, white-haired “Mother” Jones, who was greeted by sympathizers with “prolonged cheers.” As she spoke, she lifted two small boys to the table and said: “One of these little boys has had his tongue taken out by the machinery; the other has had his hand almost severed in the mills.” The mansions of the rich, she charged, “were built on the broken bones, the quivering hearts and drooping heads of these children.” Then she attacked the press for its failure to publicize the evil effects of child labor because the mill owners had “stock” in their newspapers.16

“Mother” Jones had “stock” in the children, so she decided to arouse public support for them. She organized an industrial “army” of textile workers, including many child laborers, to march from Philadelphia to New York. She had no trouble in obtaining the permission of parents. The children could not earn any money until the strike ended, and parents were convinced that their safety would be uppermost in the minds of the march leaders. A few even accompanied the crusaders for lack of anything better to do. “Mother” Jones had more faith than funds, but she was sure that charitable farmers along the route would provide food for the marchers and that labor unions would donate generously. The marchers carried knapsacks on their backs and banners in their hands. The knapsacks were soon empty; the banners read: “Prosperity is Here. Where is Ours?” Young men playing fifes and drums in the tradition of an earlier generation which struggled for its freedom led the enthusiastic group.17

On Tuesday, July 7, 1903, approximately 150 adults and 50 children marched bravely forth from Philadelphia to inform the nation of their plight. “It grew terribly hot” that day. “There was no rain and the roads were heavy with dust,” perhaps an omen of the suffering they would endure.18 During the afternoon as many fell behind, stragglers could be seen for three miles. Zeal for the crusade faded in the heat and choking dust; dozens weakened and returned to the “City of Brotherly Love”

16 Ibid.; and Jones, Autobiography, 71-74.
17 Ibid., 73-74; and [Trenton] Weekly State Gazette, July 9, 1903, 2.
18 Jones, Autobiography, 74.
and a life of industrial slavery. But "Mother" Jones' spirit remained strong. Pressing onward, she and several volunteer leaders secured meeting halls and sleeping quarters for the night.  

By the second day the marchers suffered even greater losses. They had considerable difficulty obtaining food, for there simply were not enough charitable farmers who were concerned about child labor. After all, farm children worked too. Several leaders of the weary Kensington crusaders even became resentful of "Mother" Jones because she traveled more by rail than by foot. They did not understand why she always rode ahead to make arrangements for the group. The unsympathetic Trenton (New Jersey) Times noted that "since leaving Philadelphia the army has met with many hard knocks and dissention [sic] cropped out en route."  

On July 9 the marchers camped by the Delaware River in Morristown, Pennsylvania, while again their seventy-three-year-old leader went to industrial Trenton, to make arrangements for a huge reception. The New York Times and local newspapers finally were providing badly needed publicity, but what the "army" needed even more was money. The treasury remained empty, and the whole venture was almost cancelled for lack of funds to pay the Delaware Bridge toll. The expenses for an "army" of more than 100 people were higher than anyone had anticipated. With discouraged crusaders turning back every hour the "army" seemed doomed. In desperation "Mother" Jones and her aides visited labor union headquarters and begged for funds. Local labor leaders were sympathetic, for they knew what it meant to need money. The laborers who favored her cause could not afford to contribute; the industrialists who could contribute did not favor her cause. Success at Trenton was imperative or the "army" would vanish before morning.  

Only sixty of the original two hundred crusaders made the march into Trenton, but "Mother" Jones had great expectations. For the first time since they left Philadelphia there was sufficient food. A reporter for the Trenton Times visited the camp and

\[28\] Trenton] Weekly State Gazette, July 9, 1903, 2.
\[29\] Trenton Times, July 9, 1903, 1, 7.
\[30\] Ibid., July 9, 1903, 1, 7; July 10, 1903, 1; and New York Times, July 10, 1903, 1.
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discovered "a great wash boiler full of vegetable soup which with potatoes and bread made the dinner this noon." Striking leather workers from the vicinity welcomed the group, and five new recruits from Philadelphia joined the ranks. Leaders gleefully predicted that no less than eighty-five people would accompany "Mother" Jones on the march to New York.22

At Trenton their enthusiastic leader obtained a permit to conduct a mass meeting at Battle Monument Park. More than 5,000 people attended the rally to hear the fife and drum band and the message of Mary Harris Jones. Following an introduction by William Thomas, president of the Trenton Common Council, she delivered an oration. The tone was bitter. After referring to John D. Rockefeller and to everyone else who did not labor for a livelihood as "bums," she "roasted" United States Senators for taking bribes to pass legislation, while castigating ministers for their fear of preaching what they really believed about the problems of society. Trenton laboring men who had failed to provide financial support for the marchers were denounced as "cheap" and unsympathetic toward the cause of organized labor. But "Mother" Jones also discussed child labor. "Women have learned," she declared, "that their children are taken away from them and put to work when they should be in school. What is the use of bringing a lot of children into the world to make more money for the plutocrats... Our cause is a just one," she concluded, and we must continue.23

In spite of this turn-out "Mother" Jones was not impressed by Trenton. Local labor unions were not especially helpful. The collection taken during the mass rally on Friday evening amounted to less than $100.00, and an address to the Trenton Central Labor Union yielded only $10.00—a rather meager sum to support an "army." Reporters for the Trenton Times claimed that the meeting was a "fizzle" and evidently were much relieved when the crusaders departed "winkin' and blinkin' in the dusty road" to Princeton.24

The heat on the morning of July 11 delayed the marchers, who bivouacked near Stony Brook at noon. They did not reach

22 Trenton Times, July 10, 1903, 1; and Jones, Autobiography, 75.
23 New York Times, July 11, 1903, 1; and Trenton Times, July 11, 1903, 1.
24 Ibid.
Princeton until 3:30 P.M., and then only to be confronted by more serious problems. Winds of twenty miles an hour and a driving rain forced the shabby pilgrims to seek shelter on the veranda of the home of former President Grover Cleveland, who was vacationing at Buzzard’s Bay. The sympathetic proprietor of the Nassau Hotel provided the evening meal, but by this time the “army” had fewer than fifty troops left in its ranks. The caretaker of the Cleveland residence generously invited the marchers to take refuge in a barn. By then they were grateful for whatever crumbs fell their way. “Mother” Jones promised that “Mr. Cleveland will never regret this kindness. . . .”

On Sunday morning, July 12, having assured the mayor of Princeton that she would discuss higher education, “Mother” Jones spoke near the Princeton University campus. Her blunt discussion did not concern curricula, and it rather startled the sedate educators. “What are your young men at Princeton but a lot of bums?” she asked. “They are wasting a lot of money on an education which will do them no good. The money ought to be given to organized labor.” Then, turning her attention to child labor, she exclaimed: “Go into the mills of Philadelphia and see the children risking their lives when they ought to be at school. . . . We won’t stay home while things are in such a condition.”

Withering Princeton’s ivy was merely a diversion. The major problem was that too many of her followers already had returned home. Each day there were fewer crusaders to help publicize the evils of child labor. And the Princeton visit, whatever its therapeutic value to “Mother” Jones, did little to help underaged toilers or to soothe the aching bodies of the marchers. But on Monday morning, July 13, they moved on to New Brunswick, where their tireless leader obtained permission to hold an “open-air meeting” in Commerce Square. During the day the remnants of the fife and drum corps rattled and tooted through the streets announcing the meeting and begging for contributions. Their efforts were not well rewarded—only 300 people bothered to attend the evening rally to hear “Mother” Jones protest against

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25 New York Times, July 12, 1903, 1; and Jones, Autobiography, 75-76.
children being "pitched from the cradle to the factories to sweat out their lives for capitalists."  

The New Brunswick weather was worse than the public apathy. It rained and rained and rained. Tents were drenched; grounds were flooded. "When the rain had finished mosquitoes made a raid upon the camp." Some marchers deserted, even more dissented. "I would rather work sixty hours a day," said one disgruntled textile worker, "than to endure this torture." That night the soggy tents became so unbearable that they were forced to find shelter indoors. While Jacob Weldy, proprietor of the City Hotel, allowed them to take baths, "Mother" Jones found an available meeting hall where her sad and weather-worn troops could bed down. They were eager to leave New Brunswick, another city which provided too many losses and too few gains.

The "army" arrived at Elizabeth on Wednesday, July 15, and found more satisfactory conditions. It held two parades that day, and Mary Harris Jones addressed a rally of more than 3,000 people. Her theme for the evening included the evils of millionaires, plutocrats, the capitalist press, and, for the clincher, even child labor. The laboring people of Elizabeth were sympathetic and made a concerted effort to reward the marchers for their valiant crusade. They welcomed them into their homes and provided entertainment. Saloons in the working district held open house, and everything was "free" to the crusaders. Now that they were at last to receive tangible rewards for their sacrifices, "Mother" Jones advised them to resist the temptations of strong drink. She had enough problems without having to look after a drunken "army."

What "Mother" Jones needed was a bold and dramatic plan that would attract financial support, that would keep the remaining marchers faithful to the cause, and that would provide national publicity. While the marchers were suffering in New Brunswick earlier, someone had casually mentioned a visit to Sagamore Hill at Oyster Bay, Long Island, where President

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28 Ibid., July 14, 1903, 2; and Trenton Times, July 14, 1903, 1.
Theodore Roosevelt was vacationing. If the more successful campaign at Elizabeth was a result of the publication of that information, Sagamore Hill should be on the itinerary.

A conference with the President was news to officials at Oyster Bay, who explained on July 16 that "no official information of the intention of 'Mother' Jones and her 'army' to visit the President . . . has been received at the executive offices. In the circumstances," they continued, "neither 'Mother' Jones nor her 'army' would be received by the President unless arrangements were made in advance for the meeting."32

Doubts about "Mother" Jones' intentions were ended by the publication of her lengthy letter to Roosevelt. It read:

Dear Sir—Being citizens of the United States of America, we, members of the textile industry, take the liberty of addressing this appeal to you. As chief executive of the United States, you are in a sense, our father and leader, and as such we look to you for advice and guidance. Perhaps the crime of child slavery has never been forcibly brought to your notice.

Yet, as father of us all, surely the smallest detail must be of interest to you. In Philadelphia, Pa., there are ninety thousand (90,000) textile workers who are on strike, asking for a reduction from sixty to fifty-five hours a week. With machinery, Mr. President, we believe that forty-eight hours is sufficient.

If the United States senate had passed the eight-hour bill, this strike might not have occurred. We also ask that the children be taken from the industrial prisons of this nation, and given their right of attending schools, that in years to come better citizens will be given to the republic.

These little children, raked by cruel toil beneath the iron wheels of greed, are starving in this country which you have declared is in the height of prosperity—slaughtered, ten hours a day, every day in the week, every week in the month, every month in the year, that our manufacturing aristocracy may live to exploit more slaves as the years roll by.

We ask you, Mr. President, if our commercial greatness has not cost us too much by being built upon the quivering hearts of helpless children? We who know

31 Ibid., July 14, 1903, 2.
32 Ibid., July 17, 1903, 1.
of these sufferings have taken up their cause and are now marching toward you in the hope that your tender heart will counsel with us to abolish this crime.

The manufacturers have threatened to starve these children and we seek to show that no child shall die of hunger at the will of any manufacturer in this fair land. The clergy, whose work this really is, are silent on the crime of ages, and so we appeal to you.

It is in the hope that the words of Christ will be more clearly understood by you when he said "Suffer little children to come unto me." Our destination is New York City, and after that Oyster Bay. As your children, may we hope to have the pleasure of an audience? We only ask that you advise us as to the best course.

In Philadelphia alone thousands of persons will wait upon your answer, while throughout the land, wherever there is organized labor, the people will anxiously await an expression of your sentiments toward suffering childhood.

On behalf of these people, we beg that you will reply and let us know where we may expect an audience.

The reply should be addressed to Mother Jones' Crusaders, en route according to the daily papers. We are very respectfully yours.

Mother Jones, Chairman

Committee
Charles Sweeney, Edward A. Klingersmith,
Emanuel Hanson, Joseph Diamond.33

The tone of the letter was diplomatic—"Mother" Jones did not challenge the proud Chief Executive, but tactfully asked him for advice and for an opportunity to discuss the problems of child labor. The reaction of the press and government officials, however, was startling. "Mother' Mustn't 'Storm' President," the Trenton Times warned. "Preparations are being quietly made to head off the little army. ... If necessary the little band of secret service men will be reinforced by police and detectives from Brooklyn and New York."34 These fears were entirely unwarranted. When the "army" arrived at Paterson, New Jersey, on July 18, there remained less than 30 of the original 200 crusaders, and none were heavily armed! It was not likely that the reserves would be needed to save the Republic from overthrow.

34 Trenton Times, July 16, 1903, 1.
While Oyster Bay seethed with excitement, the “army” was being well received at Paterson. Helvetia Hall “was packed to the doors” by an “enthusiastic throng of men and women.” “Mother” Jones, introduced by Secretary Daniel Tewan of the Textile Workers’ Union, presented her usual criticism of industrial America. Her audience, however, was more interested in learning of her plans for New York and Oyster Bay. She did not disappoint them. The children had traveled too far to be “bluffed” by authorities.35

“Mother” Jones and a few leaders immediately went ahead to make arrangements for what she hoped would be a triumphant entry into New York. She was given “a rousing welcome” on Sunday evening, July 19, by several thousand people. “There is one thing I must tell you,” she exclaimed, “and that is, that I am going to complete the journey to Oyster Bay. . . . The newspapers say he will not see me,” she added, but “I am going there to find out if he is the President of the capitalists only, or whether he is the President of the workingmen too.”36

The last stop before Sagamore Hill was New York City, the original goal of the “army” when it left Philadelphia two weeks earlier. “Mother” Jones was chagrined, however, by the lack of cooperation on the part of New York officials. Initially both the police commissioner and Mayor Seth Low refused to grant permits to parade through the streets or to hold a rally in Madison Square Garden. Only by a last minute plea to the mayor was she able to obtain permission to enter the city and hold a meeting—not at Madison Square Garden, but at the corner of Twenty-fourth Street and Fourth Avenue. The speech “Mother” Jones presented to 1,500 people, who included the “police officers, captains, sergeants, roundsmen and reserves from three precincts,” emphasized the evils of child labor. One of the children, according to “Mother” Jones, was Gussie Rangnew, “a little girl from whom all the childhood had gone. Her face was like an old woman’s.”37 Gussie was clearly a victim of child labor and the marchers must go to Oyster Bay.

The “army” remained in New York for several days depend-

ing upon sympathizers for food, shelter, and recreation. The children were even taken to Coney Island. But those days were frustrating for the nervous officials at Sagamore Hill, who became increasingly alarmed. Alert secret service detectives “kept a sharp lookout” for the seventy-three-year-old woman and her two dozen ragged crusaders, ready to risk their lives in the service of their country. Although President Roosevelt had not troubled himself to acknowledge receipt of her letter of July 16, his assistants finally assumed a more conciliatory tone. “If ‘Mother’ Jones herself wishes to call at the executive offices and talk the matter over with Secretary [Benjamin F.] Barnes,” they explained, “there is, of course, no objection whatsoever. She may even bring with her one or two of her lieutenants;” they generously added.38

On Saturday, August 1, “Mother” Jones and three of her “factory boys” visited the executive offices. They hoped that Roosevelt would receive them and hear their story. It seemed to them that a brief meeting with the Chief Executive was a small request after marching through heat and dust and rain and wind for three long weeks. The reporter for the United Mine Workers Journal denounced “the secret service detectives and the red tape” that surrounded “the divinity of the head of the Republic.” It proved entirely too much for Mary Harris Jones. Exchanging pleasantries with Secretary Barnes was a poor substitute for seeing the President of the United States. In fact, the whole affair was “pathetic.”39 “Mother” Jones was more graphic: “It is a very sad commentary on the President of our nation that the plea of suffering little children who walked 100 miles . . . should be turned down.” 40

But “turned down” they were, and “Mother” Jones and the mill children began their bitter retreat to Philadelphia. From the start they had been confronted with hostile receptions, poor financial support, and a public that at best was uninterested in the muck they had raked. “Mother” Jones herself had “aged perceptibly since she started out on her crusade,” reported the United Mine Workers Journal. “Pluck and determination can

38 Trenton Times, July 27, 1903, 1.
39 United Mine Workers Journal, August 6, 1903, 1.
40 Trenton Times, August 1, 1903, 2.
do miracles . . . but an elderly woman’s physical strength has its limit.”41 There was only a momentary thrill when she boldly announced plans for a huge children’s march on Washington in the fall of 1904. A larger and better organized campaign might draw the attention of the President, the support of Congress, and the sympathy of the American people.42 But that march never materialized, because the next year “Mother” Jones was assisting striking miners at Cripple Creek, Colorado. She should have realized that each year brought new problems and that politicians rarely found solutions.

Perhaps “Mother” Jones’ crusade for child laborers was not entirely in vain. For more than a month Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey newspapers had devoted many columns to her activities as leader of the industrial “army,” occasionally mentioning the evils against which they marched—columns that otherwise would certainly have made no reference to child labor. And, although not a direct result of her crusade, in 1904 the National Child Labor Committee was formed, and a number of women’s organizations demanded an end to these horrible practices of child labor. In 1905 Pennsylvania revised its labor statutes and insisted on more effective enforcement. Beginning in 1906, when Senator Albert J. Beveridge (Ind.) and Representative Herbert Parsons (N. Y.) introduced remedial legislation into the United States Congress, an increasing number of congressmen called for reform.43 For more than a decade, however, their efforts also were thwarted. They learned, as Mary Harris Jones herself had learned, that virtually nobody loves a crusader.

41 United Mine Workers Journal, August 6, 1903, 5.
42 Ibid., August 27, 1903, 5.