Tanner Billingsley

Title: “Mother Jones and the Coal Wars”
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Christine Erickson
Paper written for: Hist T325: 20th Century US Women’s History (Fall 2010)

Tanner Billingsley, a Fort Wayne native, studies History at IPFW. In 2011, he received the Judie and Ralph Violette History Scholarship. In his limited spare time, he likes to read and to watch quality films (Sofia Coppola’s Somewhere, Cristian Mungiu’s 4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days, and John Pilger’s War You Don’t See are some good ones he has seen lately). His historical interests include American labor history, the civil rights movement, and the effects of the Reagan presidency. Tanner also enjoys traveling, and he spends as much time as he can each year in Boston and Denver.

Abstract

This presentation examines the role of labor organizer Mother Jones in the coal wars of West Virginia and Colorado (1912-1914). Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, a socialist firebrand known for her impassioned speeches and activism, was a key ally of coal miners during the early twentieth century. Her unique approach to labor activism gained her incredible support and notoriety; the elderly woman traveled the country delivering profanity-laced speeches in union halls, usually dressing in antiquated Victorian dresses. Mother Jones was about more than style, though, and her role in the West Virginia coal strike of 1912-1913 was critical. This strike began when coal companies, in fierce competition with each other, began suppressing wages and attacking union rights; as the strike brewed, Mother Jones was at the forefront, rallying workers with her speeches. Mother Jones lived up to her name, and she indeed fulfilled a maternal role for the miners, whom she referred to as her “boys.” The West Virginia strike, strengthened through Jones’s presence, was a victory for miners. Immediately after this strike, Mother Jones traveled to Colorado, where she encountered a similar situation. The state militia, actively involved in labor disputes, imprisoned Mother Jones several times, but she continued her activism by writing letters from her cell. The Colorado strike was far from successful, however, but it did direct the public’s attention toward the plight of workers, perhaps best exemplified by the infamous Ludlow Massacre in 1914. Her persona as “Mother” was self-created, and she used it skillfully to her advantage. Jones was a powerful speaker, and an examination of her words reveals the influence she commanded among workers. Throughout the course of her activism, Mother Jones was a passionate and dedicated leader, uninhibited by the intense opposition she and her movement faced; her efforts peaked in the mine wars of West Virginia and Colorado, where she played a pivotal role as labor advocate, figurative mother and self-described “hell-raiser.”