

“Get off Your Knees”: Mother Jones, James Connolly and Jim Larkin in the fight for a Global Labour Movement—Rosemary Feurer

The following 1910 speech excerpt by Mother Jones fits her classic style. It’s a folk harangue of the money powers and their attempt to squeeze the life out of democracy and workers, paired with a deep faith in the ability of ordinary people to counter this power:

“The education of this country is a farce. Children must memorize a lot of stuff about war and murder, but are taught absolutely nothing of the economic conditions under which they must work and live.

This nation is but an oligarchy....controlled by the few.

You can count on your fingers the men who have this country in their absolute grasp.

They can precipitate a panic; they can scare or starve us all into submission.

But they will not for long, according to my notion.

For, although they give us sops whenever they think we are asserting a little independence, we will not always be fooled.

Some day we will have the courage to rise up and strike back at these great 'giants' of industry, and then we will see that they weren't 'giant' after all—they only seemed so because we were on our knees and they towered above us.

The Labor World October 29, 1910 Cleveland Ohio

If we listen carefully, we will hear more than Mother Jones’ Cork inflection as we imagine her delivering this speech. The comment about rising from the knees to strike back is well-associated with the iconic anthem of the 1913 Dublin uprising and Jim Larkin. Many people, especially after the commemorations of the 1913 lockout and the focus on James Larkin in Ireland today might associate the phrase with Larkin. The words are after all on his monument in Dublin, beneath a figure whose demeanor reminds me much of Jones. They are engraved in English, French and Irish on the base on O’Connell street in Dublin.



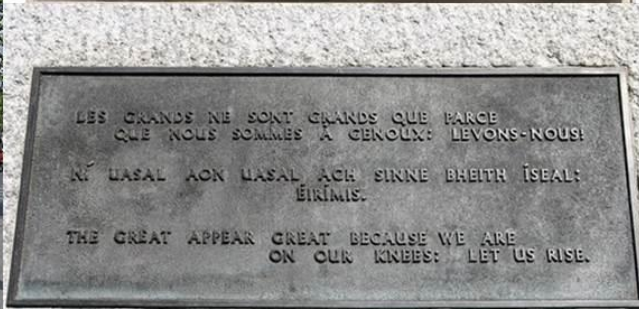
Jim Larkin, syndicalist and socialist, hero of the 1913 Dublin lockout.

Statue inset:

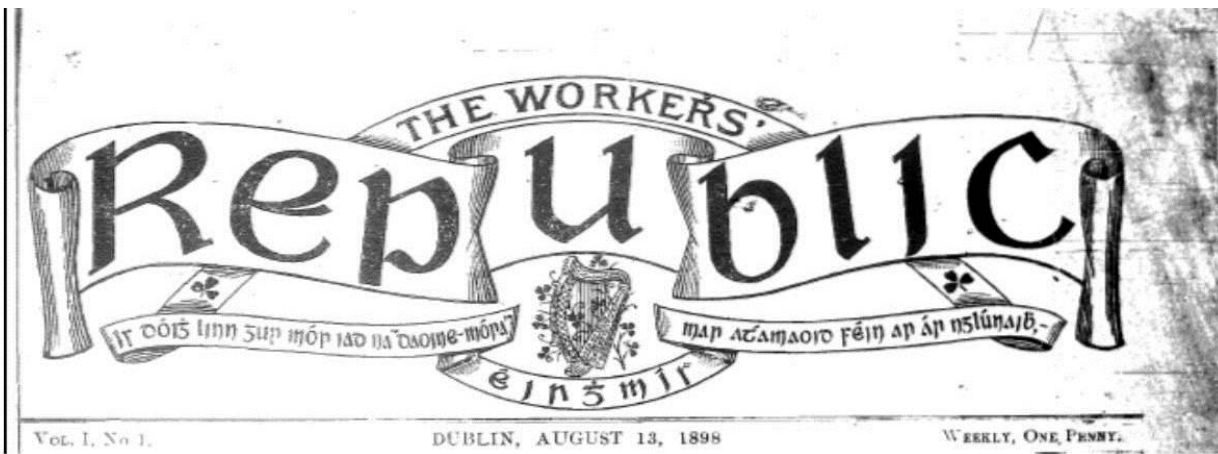
Les grands ne sont grands que parce que nous sommes à genoux: Levons-nous.

Ní uasal aon uasal ach sinne bheith íseal: Éirimis.

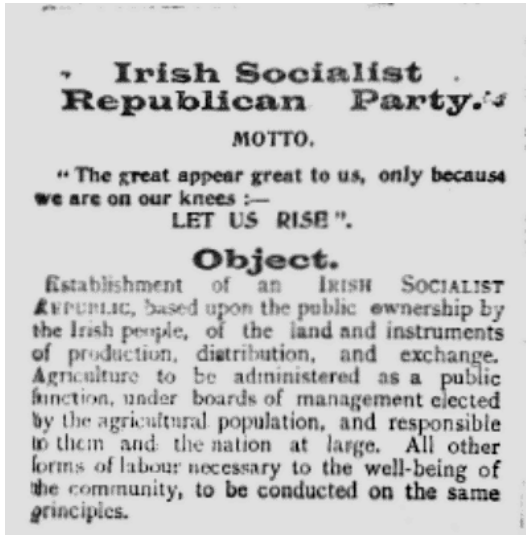
The great appear great because we are on our knees: Let us rise.



Others will realize that the words should be associated with a wider movement shaped by Connolly and Larkin. The slogan, “The great appear great to us, only because we are on our knees. Let us rise!” appeared on the masthead of first *Workers’ Republic*. That was the paper of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, published in Dublin by Connolly between 1898-1903.



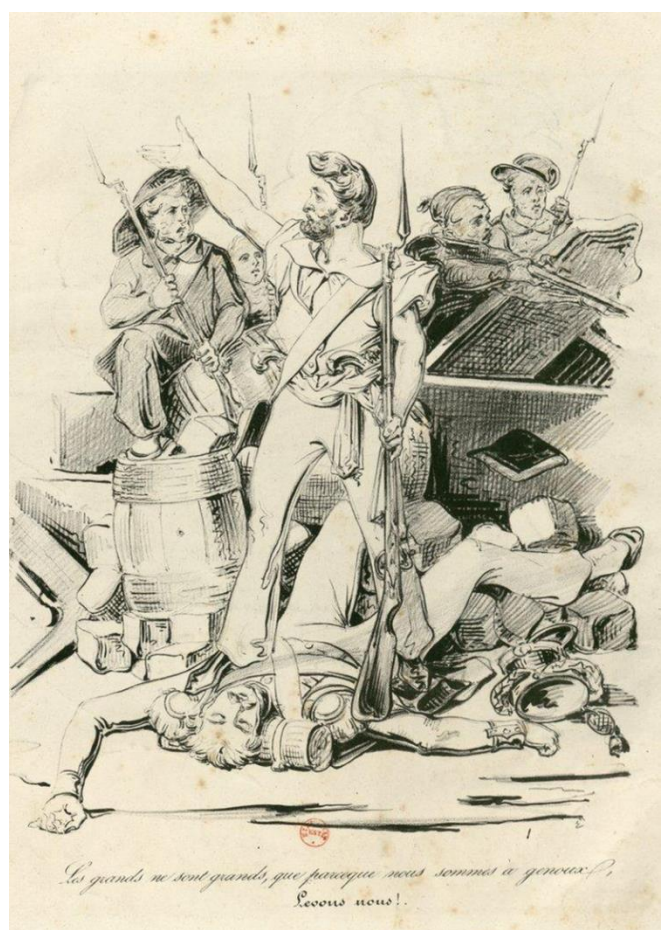
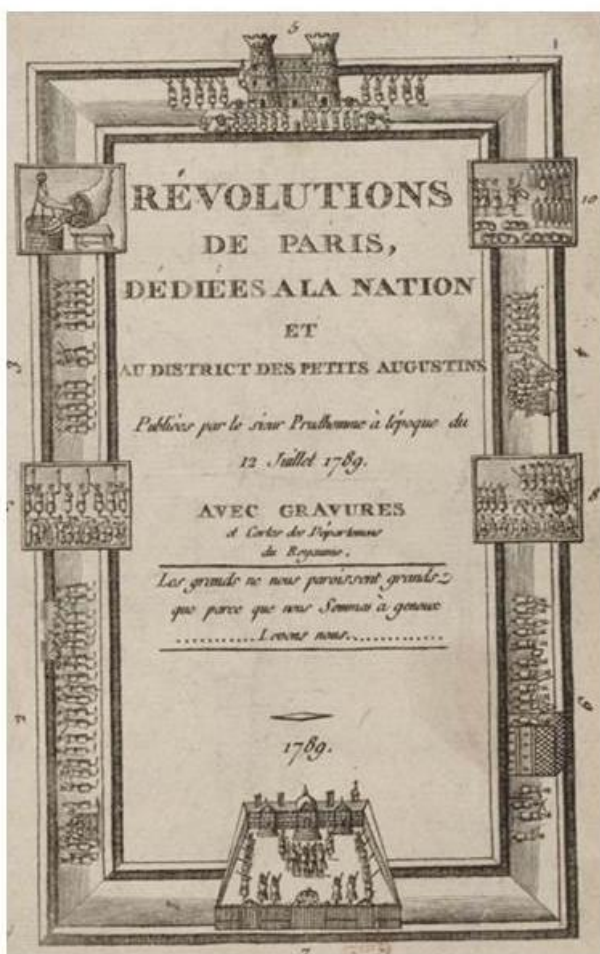
Is doigh linn gur mor iad na daoine mora mar atamaoid fein ar ar nglunaibh. Eirghimis.



Masthead and motto of the *Workers Republic* 1st issue. Initially in Irish, later mastheads rendered it in English. The words had resonance for radicals like Mother Jones who certainly knew and likely read the paper in the U.S. where it was distributed by the Socialist Labor Party.

Connolly repurposed a French saying, not unknown among English speaking radicals in the mid-nineteenth century, for the masthead. When Connolly came to the U.S. he brought it over with him as he gave talks. It lived on into the 20th century with a special Irish inflection.

This phrase actually originated in the French Revolution. In 1789, a version of the phrase was used as the masthead of the French radical paper *Revolutions de Paris*. It read “Les grands ne nous paroissent grands que parce que nous sommes a genoux. Levons-nous.” It also appeared in the form “Les grands ne sont grands, que parceque nous sommes a genoux, Levons nous!” in 1830 as a caption to an illustration of French revolutionaries.



But it's more than a slogan. The socialist and radical labour movement of the last century was if nothing else, a global movement in dialog about the role of politics and mass action in the labour movement and their relationship to each other. And it was a dialog about the transmission of old forms of struggle to new developments. The significance of the slogan shows how Mother Jones was part of a conversation across the Atlantic, and how she and other Irish radicals created bridges for the transmission of older radical ideals into the modern era. For her and for Connolly and Larkin, these were movements in conversation with each other. All three were simultaneously modern figures and transmission forces for older forms of struggle, conveyors of a long memory that sought to kindle a spirit of rebellion and struggling with strategies for that kindling.

Mother Jones' own words, in a first major speech she gave, were, "I am a citizen of the world." She regularly referred to her "Irish spirit" and Cork rebel status, not only in her autobiography but particularly as she engaged with a labour movement full of immigrants in the U.S. She thought of herself as part of a longer radical tradition, actually in her mind going back thousands of years, a fighter against empire and for a workers republic. The French revolution's mass actions, such as when women took a special role, she conveyed to a modern labour movement. When for example in late 1890s in the coal fields, or in 1916 in a streetcar strike, she suggested that women take to the streets, she commented on her debt to old traditions, noting that it was women who took down the bastille and after that, they "haven't had a king in France since." She was a Marxist like Connolly, but like him not limited by it, rather using it as one of many frameworks to develop the old into the new.

As the most well-known U.S. radical labour activist of her time (and I don't make that claim lightly, most papers at the time said it) Jones inflected the movement for socialism with republican ideals in a global context, and sought to become a force that would infuse theory and practice. And that was the heart of a project that united Jones with Connolly and Larkin: all three of them attempted to frame a labour movement that was capable of allowing people the strategies and tactics of rising together, of getting off the knees, and of faith that workers could truly do that in order to create a new kind of civilization. If the U.S. provided some hope for that project, it was in no small part due to Jones' global perspectives and her infusion of strategies into the movement, a long memory of a global working class poised to strike at the heart of capitalism. Her special contribution was to suggest that women had a role in labour affairs even when most didn't work for wages, and her strategy of making the labour movement a family and community mass-action project, and of overcoming ethnic and racial divisions within that movement so it could become a mighty force. Jones was not just a speechmaker and agitator. She was an organizer who united theory and practice.

Jones, Connolly and Larkin made this ever a human project, a moral project, a project that we can consider relevant to the present. All sought to create an inclusive style of movement that redefined the worth of the human element in mass protest and to the future of society. Jones and Larkin in particular innovated specific strategies about how you do this in a trade union movement. All three of them, as radical exiles of Ireland, chose the path that distinguished them from the generally conservative Irish trade unionists that shaped so much of the rest of the U.S. labour movement. They were seeking a way to connect a theory of radical social transformation to the workers' movement that existed "on the ground."

Connolly and Jones' organizational paths crossed, moving from the Socialist Labour Party, Socialist Party of America and the Industrial Workers of the World. Indeed, it is through the SLP, which Jones joined in 1895 but left around 1899, that she would first have learned of the *Worker's Republic* and read it. The paper made it to the U.S., impressing her dear friend Julius Wayland enough that he mentioned it and its banner slogan in the *Appeal to Reason*, the socialist newspaper for which Jones sold subscriptions intensely at the time, from Oregon to Massachusetts. She was certainly aware of the new Irish socialist movement and its slogan, and very likely encountered the issues of the paper in the U.S. She and others, including

socialist friends in Texas, were keenly taken with the significance of the slogan, as it made it into numbers of other speeches besides the one mentioned above. In Texas, where Jones was very influential, the socialist paper *The Rebel*, edited by Dublin exile Thomas Hickey, also put the phrase it on its masthead.

When Connolly toured the U.S. in 1902 for the first time, he wrote home about his new acquaintance with the labour and socialist movement in the U.S. He was astonished by the 1902 anthracite miners' strike and the use of injunctions but also with the mass actions in the strike and the intense reaction of capitalists to the attempts to organize. It would have been nearly impossible for Connolly not to have read about Jones, for she was the phenomenal presence in the strike, as is clear from looking at newspaper coverage at the time. Many stories acknowledged Jones' strategy regarding mass action in a series of mining strikes from 1897-1902, the kind that would bestir Dublin when Larkin took hold later. Pennsylvania miners and their families held deep faith in Jones' leadership, emanating from previous years of strike actions, and her hold on them impressed almost every reporter who encountered it. She was regularly contrasted in papers with the leadership of the president of the union, conservative Irish trade unionist John Mitchell. Newspapers carried photos and reports of her, noting that some new immigrant women placed her photo on their walls. At the heart of Jones' strategy was a complete faith in immigrants derided as racially inferior in dominant culture, who showed they could unite; at the center of that faith was a regard for the role of women.

Chiefs of the Coal Strikers-1902 September headline. Mother Jones and the more conservative Irish UMWA leaders of the 1902 coal strike. Jones was the leader of the mass actions.



When Connolly wrote home about the mass actions of this strike, he was indirectly giving credit to Jones, who along with a small cohort of left activists in the union who had inaugurated them as purposeful theatre and had cultivated them from 1897-1902 in fits in starts.

Did Connolly hear of Jones' controversial call for a general strike, later the heart of the syndicalist project of the IWW and new unionism, in the coal fields? If so, he didn't write about it in what remains of his correspondence. There may be a reason. The sectarian divisions that roiled the SLP could very well have made him reluctant to acknowledge her.

Jones had left the SLP by the time that Connolly arrived for a speaking tour in 1902 as a member of that group. She was a radical who refused to separate her trade union activism from her socialist activism, a factor that annoyed many

New York Times Political. Oct 18, 1902

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY

MASS MEETING,
Cooper Union, Sat., Oct. 18, 8 P. M.

MOTHER JONES

Will speak on
COAL STRIKE

and Joseph Barondess, Frank Steverman, W.
Thurston Brown, Fred J. Long, W. W. Atkinson.
Singing. Music. All welcome.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY.

officials in the mine workers union. Connolly meanwhile was deeply convinced of the viability of the SLP while Jones had rejected it as an organization capable of contributing to that transformation. Indeed, Connolly was clearly an SLP “party man” who on his tour in 1902 denounced the Social Democratic Party (soon to become the Socialist Party) of which Jones was an active member after 1899. The sectarian disputes that plagued

these groups would have made it unlikely that he would have sought out Jones or written about her. Connolly and SLPers at this time referred to Socialist Party members as “Kangaroos” (jumping from one reform to another without clear theory).

But Mother Jones’ decision to plunge head first into the mine workers union struggles contributed significantly to the development of mass movement organizing in the US and the rise of the “new unionism” movement in the US, and that would play a role in the model for the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (IGTWU, today SIPTU). Many have portrayed Mother Jones’ greatest strength as a speechmaker and agitator, but we should appreciate how deeply she considered the same intellectual and doctrinal matters that concerned Connolly and Larkin in these years.

All three activists thought about mechanisms that would allow working class people to overcome divisions in order to create their capacity to lead a “higher and grander civilization.” As socialists, they were sure that workers could learn to manage the economy on their own. As trade unionists they wanted to figure out how trade unions could become a vehicle along with political action to bring about that future. This indeed was the connection between theory and practice, from a global perspective, that Jones was innovating.

The experience in mass action strikes, she concluded, was the basis for building workers’ capacity to manage the economy. Jones travelled across the country putting these theories into action. In coalfields across the breadth of the United States, she saw racial doctrines put in place by mine managers, the implementation of racial regimes to obstruct mine workers unity. She witnessed many sectors of the labor movement acceptance of those regimes or their respond with “pure and simple” trade unionism, separated from social transformation. She sought solutions to that limited construction and did so by organizing families, women and children, and elevating the mass parade to an art and a drama to demonstrate unity. The ideal of one big union, later the heart of the IWW project, had some of its genesis in a little of her innovations.

She celebrated personal transformations in which formerly powerless people learned to shape the UMWA into a mighty force and success that came from locating the heart of the union in the miners’ homes and communities, in uniting their family as a base for struggle. She also took heart in the socialist cadres that were developing in the union, a cadre that came with success and struggle and a contract. While the SLP’s leader Daniel DeLeon argued that contracts would lead to a reform mindset, she was convinced that mass action in the most diverse workforce and communities would lead to the capacity for social transformation, as long as their unions were democratic.

Her amazing pace led her to neglect writing about these ideas fully, but by following her speeches and comments and interviews across the U.S. it is possible to trace the elements of this intellectual trajectory. Jones was not only approaching this as an agitator in these communities. While Connolly was clearly the intellectual heavyweight, we should recognize that Jones was thinking carefully based on multiple readings, and trying to integrate theory and action; she was thus acting on theory as much as just rabble-rousing. Her absolute faith in the capacity of human beings was matched by Connolly's and Larkin's, and it was in dialog with writings of the global movement.

Connolly at first was less fully engaged in trade union activism, and much more engaged in writing and debating with one of the most peculiar men in the socialist movement, SLP leader Daniel DeLeon. While Connolly ultimately won the debate, he also witnessed the steep decline of the SLP after he came back to the U.S. in 1903 to organize for it. The core question of the debate was whether it was best for socialists to put most of their energy in running candidates on their ticket, or whether they should engage in the struggle for bargaining for wages etc. DeLeon argued that trade union victories would be shallow because higher wages would produce higher prices and the net result would be actually counterproductive and reformist, leaving the socialist project in the dust. Connolly derided this as an incorrect interpretation of Marx's labour theory of value.

We do not have a record of any response of Mother Jones to this debate, but it is hard to imagine that she had much patience with DeLeon's notions. As a leader of the Kansas SLP from 1895 until 1899 she simply ignored the argument. Before trade union audiences after 1897 she argued that a contract was not enough, and before socialist audiences that running for office wasn't enough--they should build the capacity of workers to act by supporting their strikes as vigorously as possible. A movement that could get people off their knees would only be forged by doing both.

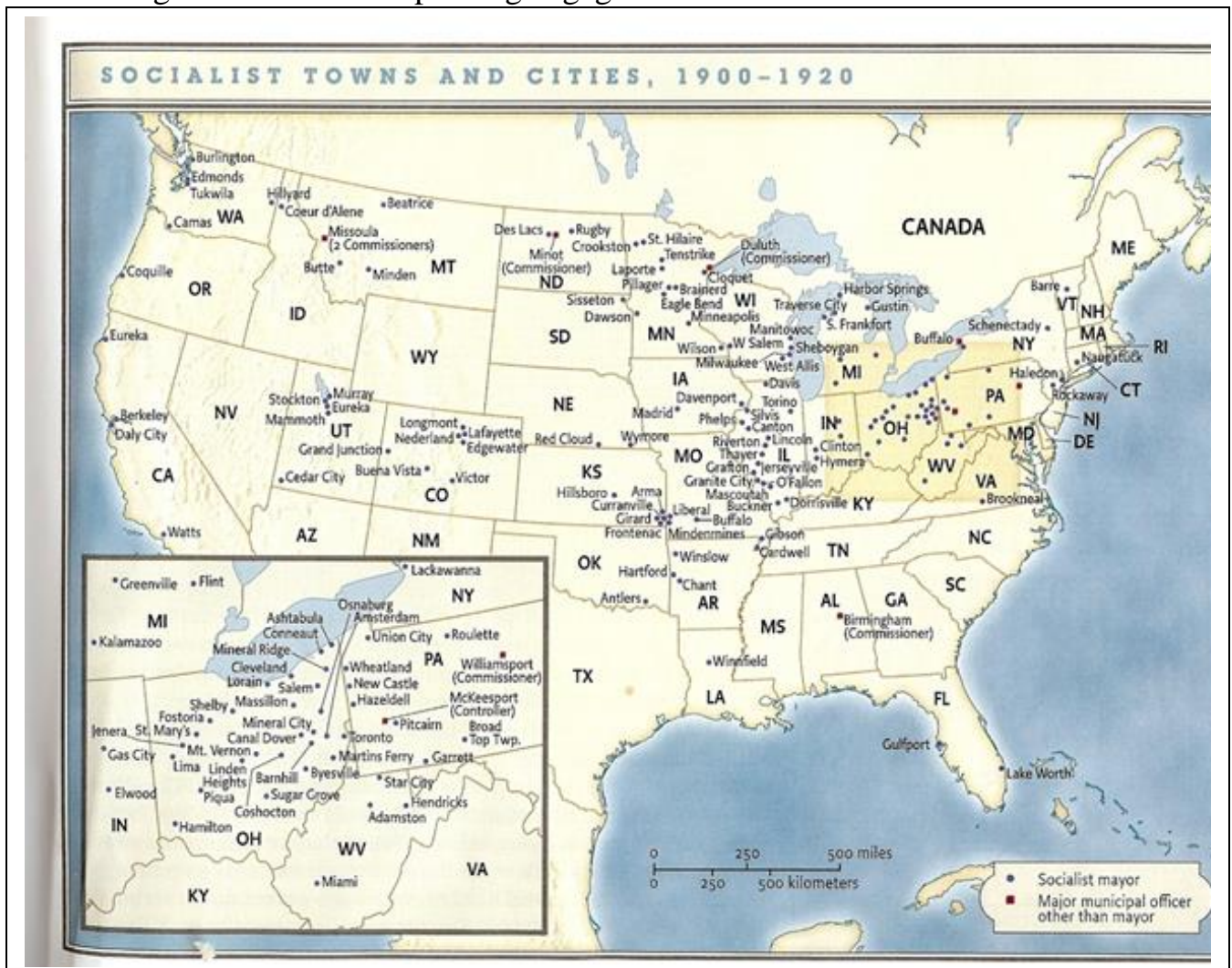
Mother Jones' activism in mass action struggles of the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers in the period from 1897-1905 helped to bring about the foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW/Wobblies) in Chicago in 1905. The Wobblies were certainly a touchstone for Connolly and Larkin, a beacon of the "one big union" to which they committed. But while Jones was a key to the organization's history, the purity the organization demanded in its early years alienated her and many of the radical UMWA activists. In southern Illinois, for example, the IWW demanded members openly repudiate their contract and denounce socialist UMWA leaders. Jones ended up more distant from the Wobblies because of this, forever urging them to attempt unity not dual unionism. She had forged alliances with many radicals who for a variety of reasons felt it would be disastrous to abandon the UMWA structures they helped build, no matter their limits.

This should not cause us to lose sight of what she and other radical Irish activists shared in respect to theory and practice. By 1908 Jones and Connolly were closely aligned because he had abandoned the SLP and joined the Socialist Party and the IWW. While much of radical movement seems sectarian, Jones and Connolly took a more unifying approach during this period than it might seem from isolated comments. The socialist movement in the U.S. seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds, with much of Europe predicting success there first; it was an exciting place for Connolly and later, for Larkin, to be and to learn.

We know that Connolly accompanied Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the young agitator of the IWW, when Flynn first heard Mother Jones at a radical meeting in the Bronx. Jones regaled them with tales of the Western capitalist extractive empires where she and other unionists had been placed in bullpens without habeas corpus rights. Flynn called Jones "the greatest woman agitator of our time" and was so excited from hearing her at that meeting that she fainted, Connolly catching her fall. Jones was asking the eastern radicals to support the Mexican revolutionaries who the U.S. government was harassing when they crossed the border to escape the cruel Diaz regime. She had taken on the job reluctantly when

the Socialist Party wouldn't. The global perspective, which asked U.S. radicals to challenge U.S. imperialism in Mexico, came out of her commitment to inter-ethnic organizing, and a deep belief that the movement needed to overcome its racialized perspectives. Jones had been organizing in a small mining town of Douglas, Arizona in 1907 when she witnessed the kidnapping of a Mexican revolutionary, making the U.S. complicit. For Jones, organizing across the racial divide, organizing against imperialism, and coming to view Mexicans as among the best trade unionists inclined her to reject the racist perspectives of many of her brethren in the movement. It was a special Irish radical heritage, in which she related radicalism to her Irish experience. She provided a model at the heart of the radicalism of industrial unionism, a true counter-culture remarkable for its time. And others like Connolly and Larkin joined in this global anti-racial perspective.

By 1908, Connolly had abandoned the SLP and joined the Socialist Party, and he and Jones were both on the 1908 "Red Special" train tour in support of Eugene Debs' run for president on that ticket, though usually in different areas of the country from what I can tell of the tour's itinerary. I can find no record of them speaking at the same event, but can find record of them closely following the other or taking over the other's speaking engagement.



I am inclined to imagine that somewhere along this route, Jones and Connolly became comrades and had some very fine discussions. Perhaps Connolly shared his misgivings about coming to the U.S. and Jones encouraged him to go home when he could. Why can we imagine this? Because we have the testimony of a reliable source, a relative of Flynn's, that it was to Jones that Connolly first confided that he had given up organizing in the U.S. and would return to Ireland. This fact gives us more to think about, more to consider in recognizing the bonds Jones felt to the home of her birth. I can well imagine her telling Connolly that the fight had to happen all over the world, and he could best serve the movement by organizing in Ireland not the U.S. I can also imagine the sorry she felt over the fate of the Irish workers' republic when she learned of Connolly's execution.

After 1910 Mother Jones would have read that Connolly had joined with Big Jim Larkin to shape a vibrant mass-based unionism in the pages of the *International Socialist Review*, whose editors she knew and whose text she read avidly. Reports of Ireland's labour movement and Big Jim Larkin were paired alongside the dramatic events of miners of Paint-Creek/Cabin-Creek strikes and

the Colorado Coal Field Strike of 1913-1914, events that catapulted her to the rock of ages among working class families. Jones in these years referred to a global movement that would rock the foundations of capitalism, and certainly the events in Ireland were part of her perspective. In these years Jones felt certain that workers were winning the battle toward the workers republic of her dreams and theirs. After the Ludlow massacre, the call for nationalization of the coal mines so that this natural resource could be used for the benefit of people was a continued call by the miners.



The quest for an industrial union movement capable of social transformation was also at the heart of Jim Larkin's mission. Larkin's style and approach was very much like Mother Jones' in many respects. Like her, he tried to make the union movement a family movement, a movement that spoke to the whole person, not just the wage earner. Exiled after 1914, Larkin came to the U.S. and influenced a great many struggles that were also of concern to Mother Jones. The most notable was their joint organizing in the Great Steel Strike of 1919.

Jones and Larkin were paired by surveillance agents of U.S. Military Intelligence Division (MID) of the army, which spied on both of them in their participation in strikes during the red scare of 1919 and believed they were dangerous alien forces in the U.S. MID made much of Mother Jones' comment that she was a Bolshevik; she was able to throw it back in their faces, telling agents to write it all down: for her that meant a deep belief in democracy, majority rule, and a fulfillment of the old dream of a workers republic. Her gender, citizenship, and notoriety allowed her to get away with such statements; for Larkin commitment it meant jailing and eventual deportation back to Ireland.

Of course, the dream of a workers' republic was tarnished by deep repression of this era in the U.S. and forgetting of the origins and multiple meanings of these ideals across a century of a murderous regime that forever took away this meaning for the word. Still, we should remember that for Jones, as for Connolly and Larkin in this era, socialism, radicalism, syndicalism all embodied a supremely democratic hope, a moral and fresh hope in possibilities and human potential.

Jones' final comments to the world proclaimed that the globally organized labour class could organize the economy for the benefit of ordinary people, not the elite: "I am a red, a radical, an IWW, I'm anything that would change this moneyed civilization." Through all the distinctions, she shared with Connolly and Larkin a deep belief that a workers republic was the only path to a "higher and grander civilization." They thought seriously and achieved much in transferring theory to a real movement, and acted on their dreams of a workers' republic. No matter how much the rest of the 20th century deflected away from that goal, the ideals they spoke of have not been supplanted, and the long memory of what they did accomplish might still inspire us to dream of doing what they did--transform dreams into strategies in our own need for a global project for a higher and grander civilization.