

# A Handful of Recommended LABOR HISTORY BOOKS FOR KIDS



## *Wisconsin connection in the text!*

1. Colman, Penny. Rosie The Riveter: Women Working on the Home Front in World War II. New York: Crown Publishers, 1995. 120 p. Ages 10 to 14; grades 5 to 9. ISBN 0-517-59790-X (hardcover), 0-517-88567-0 (paperback). With so many of the nation's men mobilized into the armed services to fight during World War II, women had opportunities to work in many types of jobs ordinarily closed to them and this book does a wonderful job of telling that history. Over sixty black-and-white photographs illustrate the story; there's even "a photograph showing newly developed attire for women workers at Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing Company in MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN" (see p. 67 for the picture).

2. Colman, Penny. Strike!: The Bitter Struggle of American Workers from Colonial Times to the Present. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press, 1995. 80 p. Ages 9 to 11; grades 4 to 6. ISBN 1-56294-459-2 (hardcover). Colman explains and provides many examples of how the strike tactic has been used throughout U.S. history by workers and why workers have resorted to strikes in order to effect changes at their job; black and white illustrations are included throughout.

## *Wisconsin connection in the text!*

3. Kraft, Betsy Harvey. Mother Jones: One Woman's Fight for Labor. New York: Clarion Books, 1995. 116 p. Ages 9 to 12; grades 4 to 7. ISBN 0-395-67163-9 (hardcover). Mother Jones led such a dramatic and inspiring life as a labor organizer that at least six biographies of her life have been published for juvenile readers in just the last

ten years and this is one of the best. A gifted public speaker and skilled in creating needed publicity to sway public opinion regarding labor struggles, Mother Jones was a witness to, as well as a participant in, some of the most dramatic moments in our country's history from the Civil War until her death in 1930. Over seventy black-and-white illustrations (historical drawings, photographs and reproductions) are used to tell the turbulent history of the period and the story of Mother Jones' life from her birth, probably in 1837, as Mary Harris in Cork, Ireland, and then immigration to the United States with her family, while she was still a young child. When she had grown up, she worked as a teacher and as a seamstress, until her marriage in 1861 in Memphis, Tennessee, to George Jones, who worked as an iron molder and was a member of the Iron Molders Union; tragically, her husband and all four of their small children died from a yellow fever epidemic in Memphis in 1867 and Mary Jones then moved to Chicago to work as a seamstress again.

After surviving the 1871 Chicago fire which devastated large portions of the city, her interest in labor organizing was sparked through attendance at lectures sponsored by the Knights of Labor, a labor organization prominent at the time and she supported their campaign in the mid-1880s to win an eight-hour day for all workers. She was still in Chicago in 1886 when on May 4 the controversial confrontation occurred between city police and workers gathered at a rally in the city's Haymarket Square to hear speakers urging a general strike to win the eight-hour day. In 1895 she was a co-founder of an important

progressive magazine of the day, Appeal to Reason. By now she was becoming known for her gifts as a speaker and was being asked to travel around the country to wherever workers faced difficulty in organizing a labor union. Sometimes she wrote magazine articles exposing the true conditions faced by workers in different jobs. Then, in 1900, she got her first job as an organizer for a labor union, the United Mine Workers of America.

Mother Jones went all over the country to help expose the deplorable working conditions for men and women, as well as children, in all kinds of industries, whether cotton mills in Alabama, textile mills in New Jersey, or mines in Colorado and West Virginia. In 1910, she even came to MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN, at the request of the women who worked in the city's breweries washing bottles—they wanted her to help them win a union to better their pay and working conditions (see p. 69 for the details about Mother Jones in Milwaukee).

4. Smith, Mike and Smith, Pam. The Reuther Brothers: Walter, Roy, and Victor. Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2001. 84 p. (Detroit Biography Series for Young Readers. Ages 10 and up. ISBN 08143-2994-2 (hardcover), 0-8143-2995-0 (paperback). This is the story of the lives of Walter, Roy and Victor Reuther, three brothers who grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia. As adults, all three brothers moved to Detroit, Michigan, to work in the automobile factories there. They were staunch trade union supporters all of their lives and became members of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW). All three of the brothers helped in the important strikes in 1936 by automobile workers in Michigan and then devoted their lives to the UAW, including Walter being elected a vice president of the UAW's international union in 1936 and its president in 1946. Wonderfully written and illustrated with over thirty black-and-white photographs, this joint biography covers their entire lives.

5. Stanley, Jerry. Big Annie of Calumet: A True Story of the Industrial Revolution. New York: Crown Publishers, 1996. 102 p. Ages 10 and up; grades 5 and up. ISBN 0-517-70097-2 (hardcover). An outstanding example of writing for a younger audience! This wonderful book, illustrated throughout with black-and-white photographs, tells the story of the bitter 1913 strike by the copper miners of the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and of one of the inspiring leaders of that strike, Annie Clemenc (pronounced "Clements"), a 25-year-old miner's wife, who helped rally community support for the striking miners. So seamlessly has the author integrated the specifics of this particular localized labor story into the broader historical context provided by the Industrial Revolution in the United States at that time and the accompanying great wave of immigration, that labor historians of today recommend this book to each other as the best thing to read about Annie Clemenc!

Besides better wages and a shorter work week, a key demand of the strike was for the company to stop requiring each miner to operate a mining drill alone and to return to the long-established and less dangerous practice of two miners operating one drill together. This strike will, of course, always be remembered for the frightful event known as the Italian Hall tragedy, which occurred during the Christmas holiday party for the families of these striking miners. With the party being held in the hall's second-story ballroom, a call of "fire" was falsely made and seventy-three people, while trying to escape, were crushed to death in the building's stairwell--over half the dead were children. This tragic event is sensitively handled by the author and readers end the book feeling inspired to follow the example of Annie Clemenc in defense of working people!

This annotated bibliography was prepared by Laurie Wermter, who welcomes suggestions for additional titles written for youngsters about labor history topics--she may be reached via e-mail at [wermter@library.wisc.edu](mailto:wermter@library.wisc.edu).

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