

Sojourner Truth



I was born a slave in Ulster County, New York. My Dutch master named me Isabella Baumfree. I saw my brothers and sisters sold off – and I was sold with some sheep to a Yankee farmer who beat me for not understanding English.

I was sold twice before I was 12 years old. My master raped me and then married me to an older slave, Thomas. Although slavery ended by law in New York, this slave owner delayed my emancipation and sold my 5-year old boy, Peter. I was not freed until 1847.

When I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wasn't goin' to keep nothin' of Egypt with me, and so I went to the Lord and asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner because I was to travel up and down the land showin' the people their sins and bein' a sign onto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names, and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to people. I am Sojourner Truth.

I can now live the dream. I am the seed of the free, and I know it. I intend to bear great fruit.

I am above 80 years old. It is about time for me to be going. I have been 40 years a slave and 40 years free, and would be here 40 years more to have equal rights for all. I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do. I suppose I am yet to break the chain. I have done a great deal of work, as much as a man, but did not get so much pay. I used to work in the field and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler, but men doing no more got twice as much pay. We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much. I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored women. I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is cracked.

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place. And ain't I a woman?

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

That little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let 'em!

Life is a long battle anyway. If we laugh and sing a little as we fight the good fight of freedom, it makes it all go easier. I will not allow my life's light to be determined by the darkness around me.

I am not going to die, I'm going home like a shooting star.

Song: [Keep on Moving, Don't Stand Still](#) by Larry Long

Mother Jones



My name is Mary Harris Jones. I was born in 1830 during a rebellion in Ireland. My grandfather was hanged for his part in that rebellion. I was nearly 50 when I took up the business of agitating. I organize workers to improve their working conditions. I'm five feet tall and critics call me "the most dangerous woman in America." I have no time to think about getting old; besides, I have a lot to accomplish.

I live in the United States, but I don't know exactly where. My address is wherever there is a fight against oppression. My address is like my shoes – it travels with me. I abide where there is a fight against wrong.

I began organizing with the Knights of Labor, and my work brought me out to Colorado, where I met my boys – the coal miners. They call me mother, and I call 'em my boys.... And it's true that I give most of my time to the miners, but I don't belong to any individual organization or creed. I belong to the workers, wherever they are in slavery, regardless of what their trade or craft may be.

I nursed men back to sanity who were driven to despair. I solicited clothes for the ragged children, for the desperate mothers. I laid out the dead, the martyrs of the strike.

I remember what happened on September 23, 1913. The strike began and lasted 15 months. I was 83 years old then, but fought alongside the miners. What would the coal in the mines be worth if **you** did not work to take it out? But a miner is cheaper than a mule to a coal company. One brother said he got fair pay. I want to ask what he calls fair pay for a miner. You produce about \$10 a day and you get one-tenth – and the other feller gets the balance of it. Do you call that a square deal?

All the average human wants is something he can call a home; a family that is fed and warm; and now and then, a little happiness.

Don't fear anybody. You create the wealth – so I say, let the fight go on. The producers – not the meek – shall inherit the earth. Not today, perhaps – not tomorrow – but over the rim of the years my old eyes can see the coming of another day. What one miner against a powerful corporation could not achieve, can be achieved by our union.

I'm a hell raiser, not a lady. A "lady" is the last thing on earth I want to be. A lady is a parasitical outgrowth of the system we live under. I have never had a vote, but I have raised hell all over this country. You don't need a vote to raise hell. You need convictions and a voice. I belong to a class that has been exploited, robbed, and plundered for centuries – and because I belong to that class, I have an impulse to go and help break the chains.

I am not afraid of the pen, or the scaffold, or the sword. I will speak the truth wherever I please. If they want to hang me, let them. And on the scaffold I will shout, "Freedom for the working class."

I was arrested five times. I asked a man in prison once how he happened to be there and he said he had stolen a pair of shoes. I told him if he had stolen a railroad he would be a United States Senator. Someday the workers will take possession of city hall, and when we do, no child will be sacrificed on the altar of profit.

My friends, it is solidarity of labor we want. We do not want to find fault with each other, but to solidify our forces and say to each other: We must be together. Our masters are joined together and we must do the same thing.

I am Mother Jones. The government can't take my life and you can't take my arm, but you can take my suitcase.

Sisters and brothers, let's pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living!

Song: We Love You Mother Jones by Larry Long

Eugene Debs



I am Eugene Victor Debs. My railroad brothers call me “Gene.” But capitalists at the *New York Times*, they call me “a lawbreaker at large, an enemy of the human race” – all because I fight against corporations and war.

I was born in 1855 in Indiana, where my family owned a textile mill and a meat market. I dropped out of school at age 14 and took a job cleaning grease from the trucks of freight engines – for only fifty cents a day. Back then, the railroad barons were powerful and greedy. They shattered and battered and splintered workingmen at a single stroke.

Worst was the Pullman Company that cut railroad wages to a pittance. At the time, craft unions were not set up to bargain for better pay. They organized workers by the skilled trades they practiced and refused to admit unskilled workers. I was convinced that we could beat Pullman by organizing all the workers in the railroad industry – everyone, skilled and unskilled. That is how we organized the American Railway Union and that is how we brought the railroad industry to its knees.

In 1894, railroad strikers boycotted the Pullman train cars. We united most workers in the railroad industry and our strike stopped the U.S. mail.

President Grover Cleveland sent in the Army to break our strike. His government blacklisted thousands and put me in prison.

Yes, we stopped the mail, but I am no traitor to my country. The most heroic word in all languages is revolution. I am opposed to any social order in which it is possible for one man who does absolutely nothing useful to amass a fortune of hundreds of millions of dollars, while millions of men and women who work all the days of their lives secure barely enough for a wretched existence.

Yes, I am my brother's keeper. I am under a moral obligation to him. What would you think me if I were capable of seating myself at a table and gorging myself with food and saw about me the children of my fellow beings starving to death.

While there is a lower class, I am in it, and while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.

I was jailed for six months after the loss of the Pullman strike. Comrades mailed me a steady stream of letters and books. By the end of my sentence, their socialism turned my darkness into light. I spent the final three decades of my life preaching the socialist cause. Four times I was the Socialist Party candidate for President of the United States. In 1920, I ran for president while in prison and got nearly a million votes.

I dismiss the electoral process, but politics matter. The class which has the power to rob upon a large scale has also the power to control the government, legalize their robbery, and send us off to war.

If you go to Washington, you will find that almost all of those corporation lawyers and cowardly politicians, members of Congress, and misrepresentatives of the masses claim, in glowing terms, that they have risen from the ranks to places of eminence and distinction. I am very glad that I cannot make that claim for myself. I would be ashamed to admit that

I had risen from the ranks. When I rise it will be with the ranks, and not from the ranks.

The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. No war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people. I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist. The only war I support is a war for social revolution.

When workers are in partnership and have stopped clutching each other's throats, when we have stopped enslaving each other, we will stand together, hands clasped, and be friends. We will be comrades, we will be brothers, and we will begin the march to the grandest civilization the human race has ever known.

I am not a Labor leader. I do not want you to follow me or anyone else. Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.

What can Labor do for itself? The answer is not difficult. Labor can organize, it can unify; it can consolidate its forces. This done, it can demand and command in a rich man's world.

Song: [Which Side Are You On?](#) by Pete Seeger

Pauline Newman



My name is Pauline Newman. I've been fighting ever since I was born in Lithuania in 1893. They barred me from attending public school because I came from a poor, Jewish family. We outsmarted them and I attended an all-boys religious school. When my father died, our family immigrated to New York City, where I became a garment worker at the age of eight.

I'd like to tell you about the kind of world we lived in over 100 years ago, because none of you were born then. The world was a world of incredible exploitation of men, women and children. I went to work for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in 1901. The corner of the shop resembled a kindergarten, because we were so young – eight, nine, ten years old. They gave me a scissors to clip threads. It was boring, tedious piecework. The human being didn't mean anything. The hours were from 7:30 in the morning until 6:30 at night – when it wasn't busy. When the season was on, we worked twelve-hour days. No overtime pay, not even supper money.

My wages as a youngster were \$1.50 for a seven-day workweek. I know it sounds exaggerated, but it isn't. It's true! All we knew was the bitter fact that we did not earn enough to keep body and soul together.

We were constantly under surveillance. The bosses timed our bathroom breaks and docked our pay for any mistake we made on the factory floor.

I remember when we walked out in 1909. We were on strike against intolerable working conditions. It was the first organized resistance by women laborers. Thousands upon thousands left the factories from every side, all of them walking down toward Union Square. It was November. The cold winter was just around the corner. We had no fur coats to keep warm. But the young people walking down that day didn't care what might happen. The spirit of a conqueror led us. We didn't know what was in store for us, didn't really think of the hunger, cold and loneliness. We just didn't care on that particular day – that was our day.

When the strike was finally over, I left the factory. The garment workers hired me as their organizer and I traveled the country organizing strikes in Philadelphia, Cleveland and Kalamazoo, Michigan.

I was on the road when I got the tragic news. On March 25, 1911 fire broke out inside the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City. The stairwells and fire exits had been blocked by sweatshop bosses who worried that their employees would escape or steal scraps of fabric. A spark lit a mountain of fabric and the flames spread.

Smoke poured from the 8th and 9th floors. The faces of young women pressed up against the windows – hundreds of screaming heads. At one window, a young man helped a girl onto the sill and let her drop, as gently as if he were helping her into a streetcar. That's when we heard the first thud. The girls had no other way out. Many of them jumped from windows to escape the flames. The thuds of the falling bodies grew so loud I thought they'd be heard all over the city. 146 workers died – most of them young Jewish women who came from Russia seeking the American Dream.

The garment workers were strikers, not slaves. Their tragedy led to improved safety standards and better working conditions.

There were many conditions that women would not tolerate, so we continued to organize. Now, in 1915, we were not supposed to talk about sexual harassment or sexual orientation. It's supposed to be a secret. But what's the secret? You and I know about it. We've experienced it. We're supposed to be ashamed. I lived for 56 years with my partner, Frieda Miller, raising a child together. Both of us fought for women's and workers' rights. I am not ashamed. I am angry and I am fighting for our rights.

My friend, Rose Schneiderman, told me a story that I want to share with you. While she was organizing a garment shop, she heard that the boss had a habit of pinching the girls whenever he passed them. They, of course, wanted it stopped. Rose went to see him and told him that this business of pinching the girls in the rear was not nice, that the girls resented it, and would he please stop.

The boss was a rather earthy man. He looked at Rose in amazement, and said, "Why Miss Schneiderman, these girls are like my children." Rose snapped back: "We would rather be orphans." The pinching - it stopped, because we stuck to our union.

Song: [Union Maid](#) by Woody Guthrie

Bayard Rustin



I am Bayard Rustin. I'm a labor activist for racial equality, economic justice and human rights.

I'm best remembered as the organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, one of the largest non-violent protests ever held in the United States. I studied in India and brought home Gandhi's peaceful-protest teachings to Martin Luther King and the American civil rights movement.

Today, you're struggling with the same issues I sought to change. Our nation is still torn by racial hatred and violence, bigotry against homosexuals, and extraordinary divides between rich and poor. I hope my voice is as relevant for you today as it was in the 1950s and 60s.

Back then, I organized the March on Washington. The date: August 28, 1963. It was 5:30 in the morning. Marchers were coming to the Capitol to demand good jobs and just wages. With only four hours before the meet-up, I had my doubts, like every organizer does. Would busloads of people show up? Would our coalition hang together? Would the march remain peaceful? Would Congress meet our demands?

We were marching to resolve old grievances and an American crisis. That crisis was born of the twin evils of racism and economic deprivation. They rob all people – black and white – of dignity, self-respect, and freedom. They impose a special burden on people of color, who are denied the right to vote, economically exploited, refused access to public accommodations, subjected to inferior education, and relegated to substandard housing.

Discrimination in education and apprenticeship training rendered minorities helpless in our mechanized, industrial society. They were the first victims of automation. Unemployed people of color were thrown into the streets, driven to despair, to hatred, to crime, to violence. All America was robbed of their potential contribution.

Reactionary Republicans and Southern Democrats in Congress ignored our crisis as they blocked civil rights legislation. They fought against the rights of all workers and minority groups. They were sworn enemies of freedom and justice. They proclaimed states' rights in order to destroy human rights.

Remember that Southern Democrats came to power by disenfranchising black people. They knew that as long as black workers were voteless, exploited, and underpaid, the fight for the white workers for decent wages and working conditions would fail. They knew that semi-slavery for one would mean semi-slavery for all.

That day back in 1963, our march was a historic success with 300,000 protestors and only four arrests. We demonstrated, massively and dramatically, our opposition to the forces of discrimination. Our bodies demanded jobs and freedom.

Labor leaders and civil rights leaders marched shoulder-to-shoulder as our movements joined forces. If we desire a society in which men are brothers, then we must act towards one another with brotherhood. If we desire a society without discrimination, then we must not discriminate against

anyone. We are all one – and if we don't know it, we will learn it the hard way.

You'll hear historians call me "Brother Outsider." It's true. I was silenced, threatened, arrested, beaten, imprisoned, and fired from important leadership positions – largely because I was an openly gay man in a fiercely homophobic era.

When an individual is protesting society's refusal to acknowledge his dignity as a human being, his very act of protest confers dignity on him. As a gay, black, ex-Communist, I earned my dignity the hard way.

LGBT folks are beginning to realize what blacks learned long ago: Unless you are out here fighting for yourself then nobody else will help you. I think the LGBT community has a moral obligation to continue the fight. The question of social change should be framed with the most vulnerable group in mind: gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

To be afraid is to behave as if the truth were not true. Be yourself. Be brave. Be angelic troublemakers. The only weapon we have is our bodies, and we need to tuck them in places so wheels don't turn us against each other. If we stand together, change will come.

Song: [A Change is Gonna Come](#) by Sam Cooke, 1963

Jerry Wurf



I am Jerry Wurf. AFSCME was my life. I was president of our national union from 1964 until my death in 1981.

Historians called me “labor’s last angry man” because I fought for public workers, marched for civil rights, and jolted the labor movement out of its complacency.

I was unapologetic about the fire in my heart. I didn’t have to search for indignation against injustice. It walked with me as an old companion. Yes, I was impatient and abrasive. Yes, I was demanding, aggressive and driven. That’s because I refused to compromise when it came to AFSCME and public workers. We expect reasonableness from our employers. If they don’t give it, we take it.

Dignity on the job. Respect at the bargaining table. Fairness in public employment. Those are the things our union has stood for since members elected me as their leader.

You know that picture of a priest that hangs in the Council 5 office? That’s Father Blatz, the chaplain and president of Local 614 at St. Peter State Hospital. He delivered the votes that made me president. Imagine a

Catholic priest and a Jewish labor thug praying and drinking together. Nothing could come between us – and we made sure workers were never divided by things like race, religion and reproduction.

I'm the hard-nosed bastard who hired the men who lead AFSCME today. Lee Saunders and Eliot Seide were 27 when they came to work for me in 1978. I liked that Seide kid. Like me, he was a Jewish New Yorker schooled at NYU.

I grew up in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, born the son of a tailor and immigrant parents from Austria and Hungary. My first job I worked as a cafeteria cashier and organizer for the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union. We fought the Yiddish-speaking cafeteria owners, who called me “Mal’ach Hamaves” or the “angel of death.”

When I went to work for AFSCME in 1948, we had only 100,000 members. President Arnold Zander hired me as an organizer for District Council 37 in New York City. We had no legal right to strike. We had no collective bargaining – all we had was collective begging.

By the early 1950s, I knew public workers were not going to be satisfied by having public officials unilaterally and patronizingly determine their social and economic destiny. Public workers demanded collective bargaining. They wanted the kind of organizations and representation that workers in private industry had as a matter of right.

Back then, it was impossible to push any collective bargaining law through the conservative New York legislature, so we worked on Robert Wagner Jr., the Manhattan borough president who was running for mayor. We turned out every living body to vote for Wagner and he kept his promise. He issued Executive Order 49, giving unions the right to organize New York City employees and to serve as their exclusive bargaining agent.

AFSCME forged a unique partnership between public workers and the public. We're the union that cares for the sick and elderly. We keep our

streets and roads maintained. We provide clean water for our cities. And we help raise and educate our youth. AFSCME takes care of people and that's why we must always be the conscience of the labor movement.

Union democracy, civil rights, and pay equity are not just slogans for us. They are hard-won principles, forcefully enunciated, that guide our behavior as AFSCME members.

We organized low-paid government workers employed in the hospital and sanitation fields. It was our union that led a 65-day strike by Memphis sanitation workers in 1968. Back then, black sanitation workers were treated like trash. They lifted heavy leather tubs of garbage. The leaky refuse caused huge welts on their bodies. Racist supervisors told these proud black men that they couldn't use the restroom in their own workplace.

Their struggle forged an alliance of labor and civil rights. Dr. Martin Luther King and black ministers gathered in Memphis to support the men several days before their strike. That was where I met Dr. King. We agreed that we could not rely on the good will of those who profit from our exploitation. We agreed that it was not enough to have a seat at a lunch counter if you could not afford the meal. Dr. King was murdered the evening prior to our second march. Riots broke out across the country and I got federal intervention to end the strike and negotiate a contract.

Government workers have proved that when we are not dealt with justly, we will defy the law. And we have proved that, in such situations, government is powerless.

By daring to strike – even when strikes were illegal – we forced government to face the reality that antistrike laws could not stop us. Our confrontational tactics forced many governments to adopt formal procedures for dealing with public employee unions.

I am opposed to strikes. They're hard on the city but they're harder on the workers. I fought bitterly for the right to strike. But striking is only a tactic to get the employer to deal with us. If it can be avoided, almost any price ought to be paid in order to avoid a strike.

I call myself a labor organizer because organizing workers is the main function of a union. We grew our union member by member, until we were one-million workers strong by the time I was done.

Most organizers think they're peddling better wages and working conditions, but essentially they're peddling dignity. That was the lesson of Memphis.

AFSCME and the AFL-CIO...we had our differences. George Meany preferred to lobby quietly in Congress, while AFSCME lobbied loudly in the streets. We cleansed our union of ties to the CIA and we were labor's lone dissenter opposing the Vietnam War. That's why George never paid us respect. He considered AFSCME a bastard child. And he let those rapacious vultures from the building trades raid our union. I said, fuck him!

We at the top of the House of Labor should not accept the poverty that exists in America. You know why I was angry? I was angry because there was no anger among most of my brothers. And I was angry because they pissed away the power they could have had. The power to actually change things by really organizing and using political clout. The power to inform their own members, and everybody else, about what was going on in this country. About, for example, what a terrible class weapon the tax structure was for the rich.

I supported George McGovern and Jimmy Carter for president, but they disappointed us. They screwed public workers after the election. It taught us a lesson. We need an arm's-length relationship with the boss. If confrontation is necessary, we have to be prepared for it.

I had a softer side seldom seen by people outside my inner circle. My wife Mildred and our kids, Nicholas and Abigail, lived in Cleveland Park, a neighborhood favored by Washington liberals. The house was crammed with stereo equipment, where I listened to classical music for hours. I followed the theater and I skimmed more books in a week than most people read in a year. I was a “brain picker” so table talk in our house tended to be intellectual and political.

My health sucked, but I never let it get in the way. I smoked cigarettes and gasped from emphysema. My ulcers denied my body the nourishment it needed to survive. And I limped from polio that left my foot a dead aching mass of flesh and bone. Sometimes pain was etched in my face and sweat dampened my green shirt. But I always climbed the stairs to take on any boss or politician who disrespected public workers.

Song: We Shall Not Be Moved