



## Mary Kenney O'Sullivan

*As you read this profile, think about the role Mary Kenney O'Sullivan played in the labor movement.*

**M**ary Kenney, the daughter of immigrant working-class parents, was born in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1864. At the age of 9, she began her education at a convent school, but was soon transferred to the local public school when she argued that her failure to be promoted was unjust. After completing the fourth grade, Mary was apprenticed as a dressmaker, but upon the death of her father, found a job with a printing and bookbinding company. She became proficient at every aspect of that trade open to women, and four years later, became a forewoman. When the company went out of business, she moved to Chicago.

### AN AFL ORGANIZER

Mary Kenney's work in several binderies convinced her that women had to organize and fight for better working conditions and fewer hours. She became active in the Women's Federal Union No. 2703, part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and quickly became a leader in the union movement.

In 1892, Samuel Gompers, impressed by Kenney's leadership qualities and her ability as a speaker, hired her as the AFL's first woman general organizer. Within five months, she had organized garment workers in New York, and printers, binders, shoe workers, and carpet

weavers in Massachusetts. However, the AFL's executive council, apparently lacking interest in recruiting and organizing working women, did not renew her appointment.

### AN ACTIVIST IN BOSTON

In 1894, Mary Kenney married John O'Sullivan, the labor editor of *The Boston Globe*. Urged on by her husband, she continued her work as a labor organizer and set up a group to study and publicize conditions in factories and workshops. The O'Sullivans made their home in a settlement house in the Boston slums to experience firsthand the problems of the working poor. After her husband was accidentally killed, Mrs. O'Sullivan supported herself and her three children by working as a property manager. She also ran a school for the residents of a tenement house, teaching them English and housekeeping skills.

At the AFL's annual convention in 1903, Mrs. O'Sullivan became one of two principal founders of the National Women's Trade Union League, formed to promote women's trade union organization and to lobby for protective legislation. In 1914, she became a factory inspector for the Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries. Although the job required her to be on her feet walking and climbing stairs, she continued to serve until she was 70 years old.

### Questions to Think About

1. Why did Mary Kenney O'Sullivan become interested in improving working conditions for women? Explain your reasoning.
2. If Mrs. O'Sullivan were alive today, what causes do you think she would support? Why do you think so?
3. **Identifying Assumptions** What do you think were some of Mary Kenney O'Sullivan's beliefs regarding women in the workplace?