



## Mary Kenney O'Sullivan

Mary Kenney O'Sullivan was 30 years old when she moved to Boston in 1894. Newly married, she was already one of the nation's most experienced labor organizers.

Born in Hannibal, Missouri, she was the only child of working-class Irish immigrants; at the age of 14, she went to work and by 18 she was a skilled bookbinder. Frustrated by the low wages and poor working conditions that were the lot of women workers, she became a trade unionist. In 1888, she and her widowed mother moved to Chicago where she began organizing women in the printing trades. Through her efforts, the women bookbinders of Chicago became part of the American Federation of Labor and Kenney was elected a delegate to the Chicago Trades and Labor Assembly. In 1892, she was hired as the first woman salaried organizer for the American Federation of Labor and she moved to New York. Although her appointment lasted less than a year, she organized garment workers, printers, binders, carpet weavers and shoe workers.

While in Boston in 1893, she met and became engaged to John O'Sullivan, a former seaman and streetcar driver who was now labor editor at the Boston Globe. Living at a settlement house in the South End, she organized women workers in the Boston area; unlike most women, she continued her career even after her marriage in 1894. Without the money to hire household help, Mary Kenney O'Sullivan counted on her husband to help with their three children so she could remain actively involved in the labor struggle. She organized rubber makers, shoe workers, and women laundry and garment workers, achieving her best results in the immediate Boston area where her connections to the women's reform community were strongest.

In 1903, a year after being left a widow with three children to raise, she joined a New York settlement worker to found the National Women's Trade Union League. As a leader of the WTUL during its formative years, O'Sullivan brought together affluent women, professionals, and women workers to promote protective legislation, such as the minimum wage, and trade unionism among women. She was a leader in Massachusetts reform circles, focusing her efforts on woman suffrage, housing for the poor, prohibition, pacifism, and — the cause with which she is most closely identified — legislation to protect women and children in the workplace.

In the early 1890s, Mary Kenney had successfully lobbied the Illinois legislature to pass that state's first factory law and had worked briefly in the Illinois factory inspection department. Two decades later, after intensive lobbying efforts on the part of O'Sullivan and other reformers, Massachusetts passed similar legislation, and she was hired to enforce the new laws. For the next 20 years, she worked as a factory inspector for the Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries.

*(Born January 8, 1864, Hannibal, Missouri; died, January 18, 1943, Medford. Buried St. Joseph Cemetery, West Roxbury. Photo courtesy of The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.)*

