

Brave laundress Mullany offers historic reminder of why unions matter

By Liza Frenette, New York State United Teachers

It was February 1864 and it was winter in Troy, NY, a harsh time of year with snow and cold in upstate New York. But the working conditions inside the collar factories were even harsher, and so the laundresses who worked there took the brazen move of going on strike for a week at 14 laundries.

The several hundred women were led by a young Irish immigrant named Kate Mullany and her colleague, Esther Keegan, who were disgusted with the low wages, long hours and unsafe working conditions in the factories. The women worked 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week, for about \$3. They risked injury from dangerous, scalding hot starching machines. The factories were suffused in oppressive heat.

This year is the 150th anniversary of that strike, which brought the women a 25 percent increase in wages. The action was commemorated this spring in an original musical called "Don't Iron While the Strike is Hot," sponsored by the American Labor Studies Center and written by Ruth Henry. A picnic is being held in Troy in July in honor of the anniversary.

More than 700 people enjoyed the lively play over the course of several performances, including students from local elementary schools. Complete with traditional Irish music and dance, the play was staged in Troy at Russell Sage College.

"I love the idea of a real person who was like a superhero," said Henry. "She had no particular talents but she had such a heart and such a connection. She is a great role model ... for young people today."

Mullany was only in her early 20's when she stepped out of the factory and into the streets to make public the conditions in the collar workplaces.

"It was a tremendous joy to go and see this rendition of an extremely important woman in the labor movement," said Paul Pecorale, NYSUT vice president who oversees social justice initiatives for the union. "Kate Mullany surely is an inspiration for the working people and the attention received in this original musical is fantastic."

Audiences learned how the detachable collar was the invention of housewife Hannah Lord Montague and became such a hit that, by the 1860's, the industry employed 3,700 women. Many were immigrants.

"The role of Irish women in labor is often eclipsed," said Anthony McCann, a retired teacher and a member of the NYSUT Board of Directors, who attended the musical. "She showed courage as an example for us. You're bringing this back at a time when we need the reminder."

"Given the fact that a majority of Americans say they know nothing or little about unions, this musical about a group of courageous Irish immigrants is a wonderful way for students, teachers and others to witness why workers need an organized voice in the workplace to improve their wages and working conditions," said Paul Cole, director of the American Labor Studies Center which hosted the play and operates the historic [Mullany House in Troy](#). "It is as true today as it was in 1864."

Schools or organizations wanting to stage "Don't Iron While the Strike is Hot," can purchase copies of the script and a music CD by [contacting author Ruth Henry at henryr@nycap.rr.com](#). Tony Bifaro, a retired teacher and former NYSUT staffer, produced the play. Cole, himself a former NYSUT board member, is also working with the union to create a lesson guide to accompany a DVD.

Though she was new to work and to activism, Mullany's bold actions were not off-the-cuff. First, she formed the Collar Laundry Union — the nation's first bona fide union for women. While other female unions were flung together for strikes, Mullany's union held together afterward to deal with ongoing issues. Next, she enlisted the support of the Troy Iron Molders Union No. 2 for the watershed strike.

"This play shows how labor activism really works," said Carole Turbin, author of "Working Women of the Collar City," who spoke to the audience after one performance. The Iron Molders were the first union to get safety issues addressed, said Turbin, professor emerita of sociology and history at SUNY/Empire State College and a member of United University Professions, the SUNY higher education union and a NYSUT affiliate.

By going on strike, Turbin said, the women "quite literally risked their children starving to death."

Mullany went on to lead the movement to improve collar worker's conditions for the next six years. The Collar Laundry Union supported the actions of other unions, as far away as New York City. They were not successful with their demands in a second strike in 1869, as the collar manufacturers had formed a united front. The Laundry Union dissolved in 1869 and the Mullany group formed the Cooperative Collar and Cuff factory that lasted another year.

During her activism, Mullany was named assistant secretary of the National Labor Union.

"She was the first woman to serve as an officer of a national union," Cole said. "She was one of early American labor history's most important women."

Educators wanting more resources about Mullany can visit www.katemullanyrhs.org for historical background.

Mullany's legacy has continued to thrive: She was [inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 2000](#) for the mark she made on women's rights in the workplace and her workplace advocacy for both men and women. Her journey involved working with suffragist Susan B. Anthony.

This important collar worker is also honored at the Mullany House in Troy, which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1998 and National Historic Site (a unit within the National Park System) by an act of Congress in 2004. The first floor houses an exhibit about her and the Collar Laundry Union; the second floor is the site of the American Labor Studies Center; and the third floor Mullany apartment and historic stairwell are currently being restored with a grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Cole said the work is scheduled for completion in 2015 when it will be open to visitors.

Mullany's mother built the brick apartment house. It is listed on the New York State Women's Heritage Trail.

While not a lot is known about Kate Mullany after she married, research eventually led to the discovery of her grave in St. Peter's Cemetery in Troy. It has now been marked with a gravestone and an engraved Celtic cross.

A community picnic is planned in Troy on July 19 to celebrate the strike's success. That, too, will bear history: The Collar Laundry Union hosted a picnic in 1864 for the Troy Iron Molders Union to thank them for their support.