

**Sylvia Pankhurst**

**Memorial Lecture**

Friday 26 September 2003 at Wortley Hall, Sheffield

# **Class, Race and Gender**

## **Introduction:**

There is a current revival of interest in suffrage history because in 2003 we celebrate two anniversaries: the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Women's Social & Political Union (WSPU) and the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Act enfranchising women over 30. However there has been and continues to be a problem with suffrage history: its main interest is in leaders, not in the masses – which in the case of the suffrage movement consisted of countless thousands of working class women.

Perhaps this should be the province of Labour History? The problem here is that Labour History has marginalised women: be they leaders or followers.

Having said this, why then, devote a lecture to another leader?

Firstly because Sylvia has not been accorded her proper place in Labour and Suffrage history. Secondly because she understood that women's oppression is based on class exploitation, the contribution of working class women was, for her, not an option, but a necessity.

## **Importance of Sylvia Pankhurst:**

The relationship (such as it was) between the women's movement & the labour Movement was problematic – underlying it was and still is the vexed question of the relationship between class and gender, and between feminism and socialism. It was this question above all others which led to a major and irreversible split within one of the most important of the women's suffrage organisations, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU – the Suffragettes). This split mirrored the ideological rift within the Pankhurst family, the founders and prime movers of the WSPU. Sylvia Pankhurst was expelled from the WSPU by her mother Emmeline and her sister Christabel because she persisted in pursuing an alliance with the labour movement. Sylvia was not the only or the first active feminist to view the liberation of women to be indissolubly connected to the wider struggle to end class exploitation. However, because the women's movement and the labour movement exercised such a powerful influence in the immediate pre and post World War One years, her work in this period (and beyond) in attempting to forge the link between the two issues is particularly important and repays serious study.

Sylvia Pankhurst has never received the attention she deserves by historians of the women's movement or the labour movement. Taking their cue from the WSPU leadership, Sylvia's contribution to winning the vote has been underestimated and her work as a revolutionary socialist has often been belittled or relegated to a footnote. Her work as an anti-fascist and anti-racist has been almost completely ignored.

We need to look at all 3 areas of this work:

- To see their interconnections
- To understand why & how such connections even today, are only tentatively made

## 1. GENDER:

### Separate spheres

#### The Labour Movement

The fortunes of the long established British Labour Movement underwent a considerable revival in the late 1880's. New socialist organisations like the Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party spearheaded the political break with lib-labism,<sup>1</sup> whilst the stranglehold of the 'aristocracy of labour' in the trade unions was challenged by the rapid (initially at least) recruitment of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. (Although it should be noted that despite the spectacular increase in trade union membership especially after 1910, by 1914 90 per cent of all trade unionists were men and over 90 per cent of women remained unorganised. Half of the 10 per cent of organised women were members of one or other of the textile unions and the remainder were members of the new unions formed for shop workers, clerical workers and teachers. All of these trades and occupations were predominantly female). By 1900 the two wings of the labour movement had begun a process of fusion that was to result in the formation of Labour Party.

The socialist revival of the 1880's, pre-dating the revival of the women's movement by over a decade, was deeply imbued with the patriarchal attitudes and sexist prejudices of Victorian England. Apart from the ILP (under Keir Hardie's influence), all other labour movement organisations displayed overt and covert hostility to women's suffrage.

#### The Women's Movement

Concurrently, but separately, the movement for women's rights (including the franchise), also renewed itself alongside of the growth of a mass labour movement. Together with the many successful campaigns on issues concerned with the right of women to receive a decent secondary and higher education, to enter (some) professions and the right of married women to own property and to vote in municipal elections, middle class women had, by the late 19th century, acquired an organised voice. The suffrage campaign was initially part of this general movement for equal rights. It had started in the late 1860's, attracting non-working class women and had spawned many fractions and sometimes rival organisations. Whatever their differences, all the suffrage organisations up to the 1890s shared two characteristics

- they were "constitutional" and moderate in their aims and methods, and,

- secondly they did not extend their appeal to working class women.

Many of these organisations re-grouped into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in 1897 a large umbrella body whose secretary was Millicent Fawcett.

All this was to change by the end of the century. At a grass roots level pioneering attempts to forge a link between suffrage and labour were being made, as we have seen, by working class women in the textile areas of the north of England where a group of radical suffragists exercised influence in the North of England Women's Suffrage Society. Working class women had their own organisational traditions, particularly in the textile unions in the north, and now in the Co-operative Women's Guilds and the Independent Labour Party. By the 1890s a group of women trade union activists working within the North of England Women's Suffrage Society had made considerable headway in linking the campaign for women's suffrage with grass roots women's trade unionism. In a remarkable refutation of the class prejudices of the established suffrage societies and the gender blind myopia of the labour movement, these 'radical suffragists' (notably Eva Gore-Booth, Sarah Reddish, Sarah Dickenson, Selina Cooper and others), consciously set about the task of forging an alliance between feminism and socialism. They launched a suffrage petition in 1900 to be signed exclusively by women workers. This was accompanied by mass campaigning in all the factory districts.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Christabel Pankhurst (Sylvia's older sister), despite her later repudiation of the working class and labour movement, was active in a newly formed breakaway from the North of England Women's Suffrage Society. The new organisation, the Manchester and Salford Women's Trade Council, founded by Esther Roper, Eva Gore Booth, Sara Dickenson and others was based on working women. Its purpose was to campaign in trade unions on women's suffrage. Although many of these women including the Pankhursts, were ILP members, they were infuriated with the ILP's lack of commitment to women's suffrage in the early days. This, together with their frustration with the slow progress of the constitutional women's suffrage societies, led some of them to conclude that a new organisation, unaffiliated to NUWSS was necessary if women were to gain the vote in their lifetime. It is to this organisation that we must now turn, although it must be noted that the type of campaigning mentioned above still continued during and after the hey day of the Women's Social and Political Union.

## **Women's Social and Political Union**

The WSPU was the site of tension between class and gender. Its move to London in 1906 heralded a new style of pressure group style work which was followed in 1907 by its break with the Labour Movement.

Sylvia had an uneasy time in the organisation. The struggle to reconcile her loyalties to socialism and to feminism proved increasingly difficult especially when the WSPU brand of feminism showed itself to be increasingly hostile to the labour movement - a fact which not only resulted in her expulsion from the WSPU, but also occasioned a permanent break in her relationship with her mother and her elder sister Christabel. The fact that the personal and the political coincided in a very public manner has tended to obscure the fact that Sylvia's subsequent activities among working class women in the East End of London, which earned her the opprobrium of her family, were much more

consistent with the early aims of the WSPU. In fact it was Emmeline and Christabel who changed course, not Sylvia, although the attachment of the two former to the labour movement even in the early days, was less than profound. Christabel had insisted from the outset that the WSPU must be 'independent - non-party, non-class'<sup>3</sup>

Throughout her voluminous writings Sylvia's unease with the WSPU centres on four key issues.

- The first is the nature of the suffrage demand itself
- The second concerns the WSPU's increasingly fraught relationship with the labour movement and with the ILP in particular.
- The third relates to the lack of democracy in the WSPU (which I won't deal with tonight)
- the fourth issue centres on her criticism of WSPU tactics.

#### 1. the nature of the suffrage demand itself

The WSPU in common with the older suffrage societies, demanded the vote for women 'on the same terms as that agreed or may be accorded to men'. Suffrage on this basis would thus 'duplicate many of the anomalies and class biases of the male franchise'<sup>4</sup>. Given that roughly one third of adult males remained unenfranchised after the Third Reform Act of 1884, it was not unreasonable for socialists and others to wish to remedy the obvious democratic deficit in the male suffrage entitlement. However, such a seemingly logical demand took on a controversial aspect during the period in which the campaign for women's suffrage was at its height since it could be, and often was, counterposed to women's suffrage. Hence a covert and overt form of opposition to women's suffrage expressed itself in the demand for Adult Suffrage. It was used overtly by the Liberal government, especially Asquith, a leading opponent of women's suffrage, who insisted that his priority was to introduce a bill to rectify the male suffrage anomaly and that the supporters of women's suffrage would be at liberty to propose amendments to such a bill. Asquith was able to use this tactic to prevaricate, in the knowledge that the suffrage campaign was divided. Within the labour movement, whilst there was a genuine equal suffrage element truly supportive of women, there was an anti-women's suffrage contingent which used the Adult Suffrage demand as a cover for their anti-feminism.<sup>5</sup> This said, however, insufficient attention has been paid to the pro-feminist supporters of Adult Suffrage, who undoubtedly exercised a strong influence in sections of the labour movement and, more importantly, among working class women. Gertrude Tuckwell, Honorary Secretary of the Women's Trade Union League raised the issue, a year after the formation of the WSPU, in the correspondence columns of the ILP paper, the Labour Leader. She questioned the wisdom of the tactics of supporting a "limited bill" because she feared that "...the admission of women to the existing male franchise would rest the franchise on so sure a basis of British Conservatism as to prevent our obtaining adult suffrage"<sup>6</sup> since only middle and upper class women would benefit.

Ada Neild Chew, an organiser for the Women's Trade Union League in Lancashire, supported Gertrude Tuckwell's line. She was indignant that Lancashire trade union women had signed petitions for a women's suffrage bill under false pretences

“not one in a hundred knows that the Bill would not give them a vote if passed. This has been kept from them. The Bill is a class and property Bill, and we have enough property franchises already. A vote for women by all means, but when we get it let us see that the *working women* – the women who earn their daily bread by their daily toil, and the mothers who are rearing our future citizens – shall be considered *first*, and not last.”<sup>7</sup>

A public debate in 1907 on the rival strategies of adult versus women’s suffrage between two genuine supporters of sex equality survives as a record of difficult tactical choices faced by feminists on this important issue.<sup>8</sup>The debate was between Teresa Billington Greig (ex WSPU, now of the Women’s Freedom League) and Margaret Bondfield (Assistant Secretary of the Shop Assistants’ Union and President of the adult Suffrage Society). It was chaired by Isabella Ford (ILP) who in introducing the debate declared that its purpose was to decide “whether it would be better to alter the existing basis of the franchise and bring in Adult Suffrage, or whether the quickest way to obtain Adult suffrage... is to destroy sex disability first.”

It is difficult to know precisely the point at which Sylvia became critical of the long accepted women's suffrage demand, drafted by her father in the late 1860s. There is no record of her opposition to it prior to 1914, but her later writings suggest that she regarded it as profound tactical error from as early as 1906 for two reasons. Firstly because the women’s movement's rejection of Adult Suffrage fuelled the rift between it and the labour movement. As she states in 'The Suffragette Movement':

'In the light of later events, it is now obvious that a grave mistake was made in leaving the field of adult suffrage – the true field of the Labour Movement – to those who were either hostile or indifferent to the inclusion of women... Had other councils prevailed then, the Labour Party might have given a great lead for a Manhood and Womanhood Suffrage Reform Bill.'<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, she regarded the precise nature of the women's suffrage 'magic incantation' as 'no longer appropriate after 1906'<sup>10</sup> since it was undemocratic and exclusive. A bill based on traditional demand would give votes only to 'propertied spinsters and widows' and hence (with some justice), Asquith and Lloyd George smeared it as a 'Ladies Bill'. In addition she noted with some sympathy that 'the Labour Party did not like a bill which would leave out manual workers'.<sup>11</sup> Much later, reminiscing on how the vote was won<sup>12</sup> she expressed an even more forthright criticism of the suffrage demand. She wrote:

"In those days no-one dared to ask for the vote for every woman. Right up to the end the suffrage societies, with the sole exception of my own East London Federation... worked for little bills to enfranchise less than 10% of us, and at many stages they actually proposed to exclude married women altogether."

Such misgivings over so fundamental an issue, even though they may have been stifled in the cause of women's unity, are indicative of something much more than a personal dilemma. They capture the complexities of the competing loyalties of socialism and feminism in the context of the imperfections of both movements. Sylvia was not alone in attempting to reconcile these twin loyalties, but she was unique within the WSPU. It meant that she was constantly swimming against the tide of the organisation to which she owed deep personal and family loyalty. It is hardly surprising then, that she

was highly critical of developments within the WSPU which distanced it from the labour movement.

## 2.The WSPU & the labour movement

Sylvia was acutely aware of the anti-feminist imperfections of the labour movement and was unafraid to fight against them, but her standpoint was always one of a critical insider. She recognised that the women's movement had staunch and principled supporters in the ILP, none more so than her great friend Keir Hardie. Unlike her mother and sister she also recognised that the battle to win hearts and minds within a male dominated movement was inevitably uphill, but vital nonetheless because votes for women was not an end in itself, but a means of achieving social justice for all. She was deeply concerned throughout her life with the plight of super-exploited working class women. She was aware that lives of working men were hard, 'but the condition of women is indeed terrible. Who can fail to connect this with their unenfranchised state?'<sup>13</sup> For her therefore the issue of the women's franchise was a class question and meant that it had perforce to be an issue for the labour movement and vice versa.

In 1907 Christabel issued a press statement formalising the WSPU position which asserted that her organisation made no distinction between the Tory, Liberal and Labour Party. To press the point home members of the WSPU were called on to sign a pledge undertaking 'not to support the candidates of any political party at Parliamentary elections until women have the vote'.<sup>14</sup> This must have posed a huge dilemma for Sylvia who solved it by refusing to sign the pledge whilst at the same time not contravening it. WSPU members were forbidden to engage in any other form of political activity save campaigning for the vote. Sylvia could not comply with this.

## 3.WSPU tactics

Finally, Sylvia's writings (although not her actions), show that she was strongly opposed to the change in the tactics of the WSPU. Impatience with the lack of progress of the suffrage demand and demoralised by the known anti-suffrage line of Asquith who had become the Liberal Prime Minister in 1908, induced Christabel into launching, in 1909, a campaign of direct action which involved window breaking and later more serious acts of criminal damage to public and private property, courting the arrest and imprisonment of the perpetrators. This phase of the WSPU campaign attracted widespread publicity, not least because it led to the martyrdom of individuals who underwent the privations of prison and hunger strike in the service of the cause. Hunger strikers were forcibly fed. Though reviled in their day, these women, the suffragette 'militants', have been more honoured by posterity than the less publicity conscious foot soldiers. The uneasy tension between admiration for individual bravery and unease at an individualistic strategy which at its height bordered on mindless violence, is found in Sylvia's writings. She profoundly disagreed with the movement's new direction because she 'did not think the old methods had been exploited to their full capacity' and that 'the movement required not more serious militancy by the few, but a stronger appeal to the masses to join the struggle'. Nonetheless she goes on to say that she would 'rather have died at the stake than criticize the actions of the militants'.<sup>15</sup> We must assume from this that she probably did not voice her criticisms at the time. She was sufficiently alienated from the leadership for her views to have made little difference and was in America on a speaking tour from December 1911-

March 1912. Nonetheless her own frequent spells of imprisonment and hunger striking from 1912 onwards indicate that her critical attitude was not born of personal cowardice. In fact she went on hunger (and on two occasions thirst and sleep) strikes and forcible feeding more times than almost anyone.<sup>16</sup> Much later in an unpublished reflection of the women's movement, she is even more critical of 'secret militancy', even referring to it as terrorism:

'Secretly planned militancy was a method of desperation adopted in the hope of shortening the longer struggle...I must confess that these particular tactics never appealed to me. I took no part in them. I thoroughly disliked the destruction of works of art. I did not then and I do not now express one word of censure upon the brave women who were secret militants. They acted..largely at the instigation of my sister Christabel and my mother... My sister ...declared that, without an element of real terrorism, the Government would never grant women the franchise'

Given all these fundamental disagreements with WSPU tactics and strategy, Sylvia's decision in 1912 to establish the East London Federation of Suffragettes was hardly surprising. It represented a practical attempt to pursue the kind of women's suffrage campaign which the parent organisation had, by this time, clearly rejected. However it was not the only course open to her. The East London Federation was, until 1914, part of the WSPU and may well have remained so had it and Sylvia not been expelled.

Sylva was expelled from the WSPU because she spoke at a mass rally in 1913 in the Albert Hall in support of the workers involved in the famous Dublin lockout and to demand the release from prison of James Larkin of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, one of the most prominent trade union leaders in Ireland. James Connolly was a speaker at the rally which was attended by over 10,000 people. It was significant according to Dangerfield because it was "the first and last time Irish Nationalism, Militant Suffrage, and the Labour Unrest were met together."<sup>17</sup>

In January 1914 Sylvia was summoned to see Christabel in Paris. She had just been released from Holloway prison and was as she put it 'miserably ill in body, and distressed by the reason of my journey'<sup>18</sup>. She was faced by her obdurate sister and mother who demanded that the ELF should become a separate organisation. The meeting was clearly a painful one since it finalised not only a breach between the two organisations, but brought about a permanent fissure within the Pankhurst family. Sylvia had almost no contact with her mother and sister after this. Christabel, nursing a small Pomeranian dog, told her sister that the issue was quite simple. There could only be one locus of power in the suffragette movement and that it could brook no independent unsanctioned activity especially from a group based on working class women. Such women were the weakest and thus of no value to a movement which had, perforce, to be based on the strongest and most intelligent who would "take their instructions and walk in step like an army".<sup>19</sup>

The Paris meeting was, of course, reported to the ELF committee. The committee was informed of the WSPU leadership's view of the main differences between the two organisations in the following terms:

'We had more faith in what could be done by stirring up working women... where they had most faith in what could be done for the vote by

people of means and influence. In other words they said that they were working from the top down and we from the bottom up..<sup>20</sup>

The East London Federation of the WSPU was now renamed, much to the annoyance of Mrs. Pankhurst. the East London Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS) and adopted the WSPU colours of purple, green and white, with the addition of red. Within a couple of months it had established its own paper the Woman's Dreadnought.<sup>21</sup>

## **World War One**

The outbreak of the first World War in 1914 propelled the WSPU away from feminism in favour of patriotism. It suspended its activities on the suffrage in order to focus attention on the war effort, leaving the East London Federation as almost the only active group in the suffrage campaign. However the ELFS was not the only suffrage organisation after 1914.

Christabel returned from her self-imposed exile in Paris to campaign against the 'German Peril'. Both she, her mother and their supporters toured the country drumming up support for the recruitment campaign 'and handed the white feather to every young man they encountered wearing civilian dress'<sup>22</sup> The WSPU was renamed the Women's Party and now demanded compulsory national service for women. (Conscription for men was not introduced until 1916!) Even when in 1916, Asquith was finally forced to concede the principle of full adult suffrage (to be introduced after the war), the super patriotic Women's Party actually opposed such a suggestion on the grounds that the most pressing priority was to enfranchise the men in the fighting forces. In a remarkable reversal the erstwhile militant supporters of women's suffrage now campaigned ardently against this very issue denouncing it as a ploy whereby Asquith was now, in Mrs.Pankhurst's term, 'using the women to dish the men'.<sup>23</sup> The only consistency in their approach was their continued opposition to Asquith, whose days as Prime Minister were numbered.<sup>24</sup> In 1915 The Suffragette, now renamed Britannia, outdid almost every other chauvinist newspaper and periodical in its fervent (almost maniacal) support for a 'war of attrition'. To Britannia the first Russian Revolution of 1917 was a potential disaster. It was the occasion for Mrs.Pankhurst to travel to Russia and plead with the new Kerensky government to honour the Tsarist commitment to the Triple Entente (Britain, France and Russia) and remain in the war. Kerensky did not need persuading, but the Russian people did. The second (Bolshevik) revolution of 1917 was, for Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel a total abomination. It resulted in immediate Russian withdrawal and a separate peace treaty (Brest Litovsk), whereupon Mrs Pankhurst advocated armed interversion in Russia to defeat the Bolsheviks.<sup>25</sup>

## **2. CLASS**

### **East London Federation of Suffragettes**

Sylvia Pankhurst's decision to form a suffrage organisation in the East End of London was not motivated solely by her frustration with the WSPU, but more positively by her desire to create a mass women's movement. Only in such a movement 'could the gauge be taken ..which history itself had flung to us' and this would be accomplished 'not by the secret militancy of a few

enthusiasts, but by the rising of the masses'.<sup>26</sup> She chose the East End because 'it was the greatest homogenous working class area accessible to the House of Commons by popular demonstrations. The creation of a woman's (sic) movement in that great abyss of poverty would be a call and a rallying cry to the rise of similar movements in all parts of the country.'<sup>27</sup> Hence her objective was "the building up of a movement independent in method and ideals from that in which my mother and my sister were engaged".<sup>28</sup> Moreover she felt that the traditional women's suffrage demand was perceived by women workers as a 'vote for ladies'. She wanted working class women to be fighters on their own account, free from the patronising attitudes of middle class women which however well intentioned served to place women workers in the role of victims thereby undermining their potential to liberate themselves.

## **Socialism/communism**

The experience of the war together with Sylvia's long standing commitment to the working class and labour movement had, resulted in a steady shift to the left of what was formerly the ELFS. Having changed its name in 1916 to the Workers' Suffrage Federation, it re-named itself in 1918 as the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF). Similarly the title of the paper was changed in 1917 from the Women's Dreadnought to the Workers' Dreadnought. This reflected the revolutionary spirit in the rank and file of the labour movement as expressed in the steady growth and influence of Shop Stewards and Workers Committees, but above all else it reflected the profound impact of the Russian Revolution.

By June 1917, a report of the annual conference of the WSF announced that one of its chief tasks was to work for the abolition of capitalism "and for the establishment of a socialist commonwealth in which the means of production and distribution shall be deployed in the interests of the people."<sup>29</sup> The Workers' Dreadnought was almost completely devoted to publicising and propagandising the socialist cause. Its tone and content were markedly different from that of previous years. It contained many articles of a theoretical Marxist nature written by the leading socialists of the day, as well as regular reports of labour movement activity both at home and abroad. A sense of urgency and dynamism pervaded the columns of the paper which increasingly reflected the heady, revolutionary spirit of the times. With a circulation of around 10,000, the Workers' Dreadnought can be regarded as one of the most important anti-war, non-sectarian socialist papers in Britain, achieving an influential position by opening its columns to all shades of opinion on the left. Its role in this respect has been underestimated by labour movement historians, but clearly it was recognised at the time which may account for the fact that Siegfried Sassoon (later to achieve fame alongside Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves as an anti-war poet and author) chose it as the vehicle for his now famous statement "Finished With the War: A Soldier's Declaration".

Translations of speeches and articles by Lenin were printed regularly as were reports and analyses of the Russian Revolution, many of them written by the American socialist, John Reed in a series entitled "Red Russia"<sup>8</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst made a substantial contribution as one of the first propagandists for Bolshevism in Britain; founding the Peoples' Russian Information Bureau. Her group, the Workers' Socialist Federation, (WSF) was the first in Britain to affiliate to the Third International (Comintern) and Sylvia herself attended its 2nd congress in 1920. Indeed in his writings on Britain, Lenin makes no less than 10

major references to Sylvia Pankhurst – more than any other British revolutionary socialist. She and her group were part of the unity talks to form the Communist Party of Great Britain which she joined briefly in 1921.

### 3. RACE

#### Anti-imperialism, anti racism

Sylvia showed an early awareness, unusual even among the left, of the importance of the anti-colonial struggle especially in India.<sup>10</sup> The paper was noted too for its strong support of the Irish national struggle against centuries of British rule. The Easter Rising of 1916 was fully and sympathetically reported as were the subsequent events in the Irish liberation struggle. Indeed the paper's reporting of the Irish rising was a scoop. It was a first hand, on-the-spot account written by a WSF member, Patricia Lynch.<sup>11</sup> Sylvia was deeply saddened by the British Army's execution of the Irish leaders, in particular James Connolly, whom she admired greatly and regarded as a friend.

She had an understanding of race oppression which was unusual, if not unique, for a white political activist of her time. When in 1912, she visited the USA on a speaking tour on women's suffrage, she addressed an audience at the Indian University in Arkansas and at the Negro University in Tennessee. It was unusual for a white woman to do this and she found that every newspaper protested against her action. It would seem that her empathy for the rights of black people arose from her commitment to women's rights which had led her to an understanding of the nature of oppression in general. This combined with her socialism and internationalism helped to free her from the chauvinism inherent in the socialisation of Britain's "imperial race".

She lived during the hey day of the British Empire, an Empire which had expanded enormously after World War One when the defeated German Empire was divided between France and Britain. Although the black population in Britain was still small, racism was a predominant and virtually unquestioned feature of British thinking. Racist ideology was not confined to the ruling elite - it had profound resonances in all tiers of British society including the labour movement and the women's movement.

Sylvia was one of the few on the left who perceived this and was unafraid to comment that "many of the most powerful trade union leaders are keenly imperialist"<sup>30</sup>. She went on to say that this continuing trend was explained by the fact that these leaders "are still swayed by current capitalist political influences in international matters".<sup>31</sup> However, in her view this was a deep seated ideological feature of the British labour movement, not solely confined to the leadership:

"Though the partially awakened rank and file has an instinctive notion that imperialism is something which benefits its masters, it does not realise that imperialism is intimately bound up within its own enslavement to the capitalist system. International solidarity is a sentiment which only attains a sturdy growth amongst those who are fully convinced that capitalism has had its day."<sup>32</sup>

She was also aware of another racist diatribe emanating from the left. E.D.Morel, ILP member and later Labour MP, wrote an article which was published by the Daily Herald in 1920 under the banner headline "**Black**

**Scourge in Europe**<sup>33</sup>. In it he protested against the French use of black troops in the parts of Germany they occupied after World War One. It was the fact that black soldiers (“black savages” as he termed them) were being used which so incensed Morel. He asserted that “primitive African barbarians are perpetuating an abominable outrage upon womanhood, upon the white races and upon civilization” because their unrestrained sexual appetites impelled them to rape white women and to spread syphilis. It is clear that further letters of critical nature were suppressed. One of these was from Claude McKay, a Jamaican revolutionary poet who lived in London from 1919-1921. His letter was printed in the Workers’ Dreadnought<sup>34</sup>, having been rejected by the Daily Herald. McKay strenuously rejected the “odious” claims made by Morel which he regarded as a further incitement to racial violence against the “many members of my race, boycotted economically and socially, who have been dumped down on the English docks since the ending of the European War”. McKay explains that his motive in writing to Lansbury as the editor of the Daily Herald was to point out “that it was the duty of his paper as a radical organ to enlighten its readers about the real reason why the English considered coloured troops undesirable in Europe, instead of appealing to illogical emotional prejudices.”<sup>35</sup> He went on to explain that these reasons were to be found in the fact that there was widespread strike action in the Rhineland and that the capitalists were using the race card in order to divert attention.

“The communists had seized important plants. The Junkers were opposing the communists. The social-democratic government was impotent. The French marched in an army... it was not easy to work up and arouse the notorious moral righteousness of the English in favour of the Germans and against the French. Searching for a propaganda issue, the Christian radicals found the coloured troops in the Rhineland. Poor black billy goat.”<sup>36</sup>

The publication of McKay’s letter in Sylvia’s paper led to her suggestion that he should write regularly, from a black perspective, for the Dreadnought. McKay thus became Britain’s first black reporter.<sup>37</sup> In fact although this letter led to his first meeting with Sylvia, this was not the first time McKay had written for her paper. A few months before this the Dreadnought had published a major front page article by McKay entitled “Socialism and the Negro”<sup>18</sup> which reported on the work of W.E.B du Bois, the progress of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People in the United States and the efforts (and difficulties) of the International Workers of the World (the IWW of America, popularly known as the Wobblies), to recruit black people.<sup>19</sup> Despite his criticism of some of the quirker aspects of ESP’s politics and personality, McKay, in common with other black radicals and revolutionaries who subsequently made her acquaintance, recognised that she was fearless and committed revolutionary who understood their cause. As he later wrote

“...in the labor movement she was always jabbing her hat pin into the hides of smug and slack labor leaders. Her weekly might have been called Dread Wasp. And whenever imperialism got drunk and went wild among native peoples, the Pankhurst paper would be on the job.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed the paper must have been one of the first to notice, let alone criticise the introduction of the colour bar in South Africa. Early in 1920, Sylvia wrote a long article on the issue in which she exposed the fact that the majority black population were denied the right to vote or to attend state schools and were subjected to “pass laws” – the foundation of the apartheid system.<sup>21</sup> Three

years later, under the banner headline “Starvation in South Africa”, the entire front page of the paper was devoted to a report of the way in which the indigenous black population was being driven from their own land by white settlers and as a consequence was forced to move to urban areas in search of work.<sup>22</sup>

Her comments on race and empire were not confined to Africa. Indian writers, for example S.N.Ghose, also wrote for the Workers’ Dreadnought. In 1926 Sylvia published a lengthy tome on India<sup>23</sup>. In it she identified with the growing struggle for Indian self-rule (Swaraj) in its revolutionary civil disobedience phase (1918-1922) led by Gandhi who had displaced the more moderate leadership of the Indian National Congress. The British Government, fearful of losing the jewel in the imperial crown attempted to restore their dominance first by coercion (in the form of the Amritsar Massacre 1919) and then by “consent” via the Government of India Act of 1919. Sylvia sought to expose the 1919 Act as an undemocratic sham – a view unpopular at the time since it was widely perceived as a wise concession assisting the path to “responsible” government. Nowadays, however, the balance of received wisdom supports Sylvia’s analysis. The Act “is currently interpreted as being a device to perpetuate British power”.<sup>24</sup> Sylvia was especially critical of the British Labour Party which, by the 1920s had a strong representation in the House of Commons but did not use it to demand “representation of the Indian workers and of the poorer Indian peasants.”<sup>25</sup> But the Labour Party, because it was an “agglomeration of trade unions” was infected with the same imperialist bug. She lamented the demise of Labour’s radical and internationalist inheritance. Had it “been possessed of the sturdy democratic fibre of the Chartists...it would have offered strenuous opposition to the Government of India Act”<sup>26</sup> and would have gone to the polls pledged to repeal it.

## **ANTI-FASCISM AND ETHIOPIA**

Sylvia was arguably one of the very few on the left in Britain who understood and saw the dangers of fascism as early as the first years of the 1920s. Her connection with the exiled Italian anarchist Silvio Corio<sup>29</sup> helped to shape her insight into the first manifestations of fascism in Italy which she followed closely. She regarded Mussolini’s March on Rome in 1922 as marking “the final collapse of the post war revolutionary movement”.<sup>30</sup> Such comment was not made only with the wisdom of hindsight. She wrote a long article, “The Truth About the Fascisti”, at the time<sup>31</sup> (1922) in which she roundly castigated the Daily Herald for its “unexampled treachery” in expressing admiration for Mussolini’s “bloodless revolution”. Mussolini was widely regarded as Italy’s saviour from communism. She was similarly contemptuous of the ILP publication the Socialist Review for publishing a eulogy of Mussolini and fascism by an Italian living in London. The article, she said, was “a tissue of lies from start to finish”.<sup>32</sup> Sylvia was one of the few voices on the left, outside of the Communist Party, who exposed the terrorist methods of the fascisti and revealed their links with big business in an effort to defeat the workers. Her analysis of fascism, notwithstanding her later break with communism, remained very similar to that of the Italian communist leader, Palmiro Togliatti.<sup>33</sup> In seeking to explain why she had spoken at a protest meeting “against dictatorship whether Bolshevik or Fascist” she was at pains to point out that she disagreed with the title of the meeting and offered the following analysis of fascism:

"What is fascism? It is the organisation of extra-governmental violence to prevent the capitalist government of society from being superseded by a new and more advanced form of social organisation... Fascism... is a wholly military manifestation. It soon over-rides all civil government and crushes out all democratic practices." It "...is essentially a manifestation of capitalism having felt danger and revenging itself for having been made to fear for its existence."<sup>34</sup>

She was appalled by the murder in 1923 of the Italian socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti at the hands of the fascists. When, in 1932, she discovered that his widow and children were in danger, she formed the Women's International Mattoetti Committee to draw attention to their plight.

The second half of Sylvia's life, from 1935 to her death in 1960 was devoted to the cause of the liberation of Ethiopia. Her decision to take up the cause of a little known (in England) African country might have seemed odd to contemporaries and has been largely ignored by British historians. However, it was much appreciated by black activists in Africa, the West Indies, Britain and America and can only be understood in the context of her anti-racism and anti-imperialism which had already surfaced early in the century. This was allied to her understanding of the dangers of fascism in general and Italian fascism in particular. Thus, when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 Sylvia embarked on a course which was to draw these strands of her thought and activity into a campaign which was to absorb her for the remainder of her life. In May 1936 she launched the first edition of the New Times and Ethiopia News, a weekly paper whose aims were to champion the cause of Ethiopia, to combat fascist propaganda, to campaign for British aid and to step up and maintain the economic sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations. The first issue went to press on the very day that Italian troops entered Addis Ababa. The paper reached a circulation of 10,000 by the end of the year, and at its height it sold 40,000 copies weekly. This included an extensive circulation throughout West Africa and the West Indies where "it was widely quoted in the emerging African nationalist press".<sup>35</sup> The paper was also published in Amharic and clandestinely distributed in Ethiopia. It remained in circulation for 20 years.

Sylvia regarded fascist aggression as having commenced in Ethiopia and spread to Spain with Italy "supplying its Fascist ally with aeroplanes, and... the German ally... supplying cash."<sup>39</sup> However, she wrote,

"People stood by while Ethiopia was vanquished: this is only Africa; this is not a White Man's country. They listened to the Italian propaganda; these are the primitives, their customs are barbarous".<sup>40</sup>

Accolades to Sylvia on her death show that although her work on Ethiopia, informed as it was by anti-racism and anti imperialism, passed largely unnoticed in Britain, it was widely appreciated by black people in Ethiopia, in Africa generally and in the diaspora. DuBois, arguably one of the most important black leaders of his day, expressed the view of black radicals in the following tribute he paid to Sylvia when she died in 1960:

"I realised... that the great work of Sylvia Pankhurst was to introduce black Ethiopia to white England, to give the martyred Emperor of Ethiopia a place of refuge during his exile and to make the British people realise that black folks had more and more to be recognised as human beings with the rights of women and men."

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<sup>1</sup>. This was the practice whereby the Liberal Party since the Second Reform Act in 1867 had encouraged working men in predominantly working class constituencies to stand as Liberal candidates in elections. The 1867 Act had enfranchised better paid working men - those who in shorthand terms were labelled the "labour aristocracy"

<sup>2</sup>. For a full account of the activities of the long neglected radical suffragists see Jill Liddington & Jill Norris One Hand Tied Behind Us (op.cit.) and Jill Liddington's biography of Selina Cooper The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel (Virago, 1984)

<sup>3</sup>. Christabel Pankhurst Unshackled

<sup>4</sup>. Brian Harrison Separate Spheres - the Opposition to Women=s Suffrage in Britain(Croom Helm, 1978)

<sup>5</sup>. For a fuller analysis of the labour movement's attitude to women's suffrage see chapter

<sup>6</sup>. Labour Leader 15th August 1904

<sup>7</sup>. Letter to the Co-Operative News December 10th 1904 (Gertrude Tuckwell Collection)

<sup>8</sup>. Published as "A Verbatim Report on December 3rd 1907- Sex Equality (T.B.Greig) versus Adult Suffrage (M.Bondfield)", (Women's Freedom League, 1909)

<sup>9</sup>. E.Sylvia Pankhurst The Suffragette Movement op cit p.203

<sup>10</sup>. In 1906 Charles Dilke, a Liberal MP, introduced an Adult Suffrage bill. It was opposed by the women's movement. This attitude, according to Sylvia (The Suffragette Movement op.cit.,p205) 'gave a convenient handle to opponents, who insisted that the suffrage movement was bourgeois in leadership and opposed to any but a limited vote'.

<sup>11</sup>. All quotations in this paragraph from Teresa Billington-Greig papers box 398, Fawcett Library (long letter from Sylvia to Billington-Greig - postmark on envelope 17/5/56)

<sup>12</sup>. Britain Polling, probably written in 1935, on the occasion of the General Election of that year, the first in which women comprised a majority of the electorate. PP no. 166 IISH

<sup>13</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst 'The Chain Makers of Cradley Heath' no date. PP Amsterdam inv.27

<sup>14</sup>. *ibid.* p.265

<sup>15</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst The Suffragette Movement op.cit. p.36

<sup>16</sup>. Both Romero and (surprisingly) Winslow attempt to account for Sylvia remarkable heroism in this regard by presuming that it was motivated by a desire to gain her mother's love and attention. Such psychological ruminations are at best unprovable and at worst subjective distortions.

<sup>17</sup>. G. Dangerfield, The Strange Death of Liberal England (Perigree, 1980 edn.) P.214

<sup>18</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst The Suffragette Movement p.516

<sup>19</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>. ELFS Minutes 27th January 1917 (PP Amsterdam)

<sup>21</sup>. The first issue appeared on 8th March 1914 as a special advance number, initially 'as a free weekly paper with a guaranteed circulation of 20,000 copies. However by March 21st a cover price of a half penny was charged.

<sup>22</sup>. The Suffragette Movement p 594

<sup>23</sup>. quoted in The Suffragette Movement p.601

<sup>24</sup>. Lloyd George became Prime Minister of a Coalition Government in 1916.

<sup>25</sup>. In her Life of Emmeline Pankhurst (Laurie 1935), Sylvia states "I did not know until after her death that she...had advocated armed intervention in Russia"(p.166)

<sup>26</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst, The Suffragette Movement op.cit p.416

<sup>27</sup>. *ibid.* p.416

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- <sup>28</sup>. Autobiographical notes, "Decisions which have influenced my life", handwritten mss 1937, PP IISH Amsterdam
- <sup>29</sup><sup>29</sup>. Woman's Dreadnought, June 2nd 1917
- <sup>8</sup>. John Reed was the author of the famous eye witness account of the Russian revolution Ten Days that Shook the World
- <sup>10</sup>. For example a special supplement on India appeared in the Dreadnought of September 7th 1918. This contained an in depth critique, supplied by "our Indian comrades" of the Montagu Chelmsford report on the governance of India.
- <sup>11</sup>. Barbara Winslow op.cit provides details as to how Patricia Lynch managed to get into Dublin - a city closed by the Army at the time of the rising.
- <sup>30</sup>. Sylvia Pankhurst India and the Earthly Paradise, Sunshine Publishing House, 1926 (Bombay) p.329
- <sup>31</sup>. India and the Earthly Paradise
- <sup>32</sup>. India and the Earthly Paradise
- <sup>33</sup>. The Call, April 10th 1920
- <sup>34</sup>. The Daily Herald April 24th 1920
- <sup>35</sup>. McKay ibid. P.75
- <sup>36</sup>. McKay ibid. Pp74-5
- <sup>37</sup>. A claim made by Peter Fryer in his Staying Power: the History of Black People in Britain, Pluto Press 1985
- <sup>18</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought, January 31st 1920. This article is referred to in Wayne Cooper's introduction to The Passion of Claude McKay, Schocken Books, New York, 1973, but is mistakenly dated as being published in the WD of January 39th 1921
- <sup>19</sup>. Strangely enough neither McKay himself (in his autobiography, op.cit) nor Barbara Winslow (op.cit.) who covers the issue, mention this significant article.
- <sup>20</sup>. McKay op cit p77. McKay was sharply critical of Sylvia in other respects. He was furious that Sylvia rejected his article about a strike in a sawmill owned by Lansbury on the grounds that she did not want to antagonise him because the paper owed him 20 and that according to McKay they were personal friends.
- <sup>21</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought, January 10th 1920
- <sup>22</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought, September 8th 1923
- <sup>23</sup>. India and the Earthly Paradise, op.cit
- <sup>24</sup>. P.J.Cain & A.G.Hopkins, British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction p.182, Longman 1992
- <sup>25</sup>. British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, p.303
- <sup>26</sup>. British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, p.327
- <sup>29</sup>. Corio, exiled from his native Italy, lived for many years, in London where he wrote for Avanti and for British left wing papers. He met Sylvia in 1917 and became was a regular contributor to her paper. He had a personal relationship with Sylvia until his death in 1954. He was the father of her son Richard.
- <sup>30</sup>. In the Red Twilight, unpub & unfinished .mss., n.d, PP. IISH, Amsterdam. The first part of this did, however, appear in serial form in 1936 in The New Times and Ethiopia News
- <sup>31</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought, November 4th 1922
- <sup>32</sup>. Workers' Dreadnought, June 9th 1923
- <sup>33</sup>. see his Lectures on Fascism, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976 - a very influential work which helped to shape the Comintern line.

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<sup>34</sup>. Sylvia handwritten unpublished letter to the Forward n.d (op.cit.) This is part of a 30 page letter which goes on to criticize the suppression of left wing dissent on Soviet Russia but argues that Soviet despotism is quite different and cannot be equated with fascist dictatorship. The file also contains draft(?) notes of her speech which follows the same argument as the letter.

<sup>35</sup>.R.Pankhurst "Sylvia and the New Times and Ethiopia News" in Sylvia Pankhurst: from Artist to Anti-Fascist, Macmillan 1992

<sup>39</sup>. NT & ET, 1st August 1936

<sup>40</sup>. NT & ET, 1st August 1936