

# **SYLVIA PANKHURST MEMORIAL**

## **LECTURE 2008**

### **Women Trade Unionists and the Suffrage Campaign: Gender Politics Vs Class**

#### **Politics?**

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#### **Abstract**

This year we celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the achievement of full suffrage rights for women – all women over 21 got the vote in 1928. For some reason there appears to be a greater preference to mark the 1918 anniversary when women over 30 with a small property qualification were enfranchised, even though all men over 21 already had the vote. It is thus, in this year of anniversaries, appropriate to reflect on some aspects of the suffrage campaign, particularly the nature of demand itself and its impact on working class women who were the last to be enfranchised. The role of Sylvia Pankhurst and her contribution both to the campaign and to the class/gender debate is an important one.

Hostility to the women's suffrage was vocal during the militant phase of the suffrage campaign. Such hostility came from the usual male quarters including the labour movement (with some notable exceptions). However, we are accustomed to thinking that the demand for 'votes for women' was universally accepted by all progressive women. This is not the case. In fact even within the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) Sylvia Pankhurst became critical of the long accepted women's suffrage demand, drafted by her father in the late 1860's- that women obtain the vote 'on the same terms as that agreed or may be accorded to men'. All the suffrage societies adopted this demand, including the WSPU. Apart from the usual suspects (the anti-

suffragists of various hues), criticism of the demand (although not the of the issue) arose in the main from working class women since in their view suffrage on this basis would not enfranchise them and would duplicate many of the anomalies and class biases of the male franchise which was not in itself universal until 1918. Hence we can witness, on the most fundamental strategy of the suffrage campaign, a tension between class and gender politics – a tension which was exploited by an unholy alliance between those who were opposed to any further extension of the franchise at all for men or women, those who thought that women shouldn't be enfranchised until all men were and those who were opposed to votes for women per se. This lecture will explore this tension, focussing in particular on those women who supported the extension of the franchise but who sought to unify gender and class against all the odds. 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 dilemmas. They capture the complexities of the competing loyalties of socialism and feminism in the context of the imperfections of both movements

## WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE VS ADULT SUFFRAGE

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, Sylvia 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. 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>1</sup>

Only middle and upper class women would, in her view, benefit from such a measure and this would favour the Conservative Party.

Eva Gore-Booth also an active trade unionist disagreed. She thought that under a limited bill 'many thousands of skilled women workers in the North of England...should easily qualify themselves for the lodger franchise. On Tuckwell's party political point Gore-Booth noted that the present government 'owes its existence to staunch majorities of working men' and that anyway it was unfair to 'refuse equal rights and justice to a large section of the community simply because you are of the opinion that their votes may go to strengthen the hands of one party or another'.<sup>2</sup> Ada Neild Chew, an organiser for the Women's Trade Union League in Lancashire, supported Gertrude Tuckwell's line in more forceful terms. 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>3</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>4</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.’<sup>5</sup> Billington Greig argued that sex disability was the most fundamental question of all and removing it overrode all other considerations - obtaining it would be just ‘even if only half a dozen women were enfranchised’.<sup>6</sup> She estimated that 2 million women would be enfranchised (compared to 7.5 million men) if the vote was accorded to them on the basis of the existing male suffrage law. This, she argued would benefit more women than was commonly supposed and would enfranchise some working class women. However, whilst acknowledging that many working class women would still be excluded, she justified this on the basis of the principle of equality; ‘I want an equal recognition even if it is limited, or if it is not quite so fair as it might be, because of the wrong conditions which men have made’...and that is wrong to ask women to wait until men have ‘mended their own bad franchise conditions’<sup>7</sup>, conditions which she later condemned as stupid illogical and undemocratic. But, she asked, if men use this flawed franchise why can’t women? Furthermore she questioned the motives of the proponents of Adult Suffrage since she suspected that they were using this demand as a cover for manhood suffrage and that once they had obtained this they would ‘ditch’ the women. In her reply Margaret Bondfield disputed much of the detail of Billington Greig’s assessment of the effect of the extension of the existing franchise on working class women. Her view was that far fewer women workers would benefit and she was particularly concerned at the impact of the exclusion of married women. She argued that

women who wanted the franchise on the same terms as men have the perfect right to campaign for it 'but don't let them come and tell me that they are working for my class'<sup>8</sup> In fact she suspected the motives of the middle class supporters of a 'limited bill'. They were using the demand as 'an effective barrier' to what anti socialists regarded as 'the dangerous demand for adult suffrage'. Later in the debate Bondfield was critical of the stance of the labour movement on the suffrage question and agreed that they 'have not been so active as they might be' However those in the labour movement were now 'beginning to understand that they cannot progress with their ideals until they have the women marching side by side with them'.<sup>9</sup>

#### WHERE DID SYLVIA PANKHURST STAND?

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 1860's. 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>10</sup>

Secondly, she regarded the precise nature of the women's suffrage 'magic incantation' as 'no longer appropriate after 1906'<sup>11</sup> since it was undemocratic and exclusive. A bill based on the 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>12</sup> Much later, reminiscing on how the vote was won<sup>13</sup> she

expressed an even more forthright criticism of the traditional 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.'

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. She viewed with alarm the growing coolness shown to the Labour Party and the ILP by the WSPU which was all the more shocking to Sylvia in view of her family's long standing connections with the socialist movement. Her mother had been instrumental in getting the ILP to adopt women's suffrage as a policy and had encouraged Selina Cooper to second a similar motion proposed by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers at the 1905 Labour Party conference.<sup>14</sup> The motion was wrecked by a hostile adult suffrage amendment proposed by Harry Quelch of the SDF. This was a set back, but did not warrant the refusal of the WSPU to support the Labour candidate (who was a strong supporter of women's suffrage) in the Huddersfield by-election of 1906. Worse was to come. 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. Whilst it is true that the 1907 Labour Party Conference once again adopted an Adultist resolution, this can hardly be seen as a justification for the decision of Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst to leave the ILP in that year. After all the ILP was committed to women's suffrage (since 1905), even if the Labour Party was not. Sylvia's view was somewhat ambivalent. On one hand she argued that patient work needed to be done in order to get the Labour Party to change its position. The main obstacle to this was both the hostile attitude of the WSPU and the fact that the nature of their limited suffrage demand, which would have enfranchised only one woman in thirteen, gave succour to the Adultist position. On the other hand she was, at the same time, dismayed to the point of permanent pessimism by the 1907 Labour Party

Conference decision which she felt 'precluded the Party from doing anything to advance either women's suffrage on the present terms, or adult manhood and womanhood suffrage'.<sup>15</sup> In the same passage she quotes Frederick Pethick-Lawrence's view as expressed in the Labour Record that the Labour Party decision meant 'the final severance of the woman's movement from the Labour Movement'. As she struggled to reconcile, as a socialist, her understanding of the vicissitudes in the development of fledgling labour politics with an understandable impatience with the Party's attitude to women, the leadership of the WSPU brought the issue to a head. The rift between the WSPU and the Labour Movement was complete and final in 1907.

### GEORGE LANSBURY

George Lansbury MP for Bow and Bromley agreed with the line advocated by the WSPU that Labour should oppose all government measures unless and until Asquith's cabinet introduced and supported a women's franchise bill. In November 1912 at the height of the suffrage agitation he resigned his seat in order to fight a by election on the issue of women's suffrage. Lansbury briefly became the hero of the women's suffrage movement and his decision to fight an election on this single issue alone commended him to the WSPU who fully supported his campaign, as did the NUWSS, and sent in helpers to canvass the constituency. At last, it would appear that a WSPU labour alliance had been born and that Sylvia's organisation was about to find favour with the parent body (in both senses of the word!). This was not the case. Sylvia regarded Lansbury's decision as 'rash and premature'<sup>16</sup> firstly because she felt that the East End lagged behind the industrial north in its support for women's suffrage and secondly because he had not consulted the local constituency party which felt that it had been 'bounced' into an unwelcome election. She did not change her view of Lansbury's position as time went by. In her long letter to Teresa Billington Greig<sup>17</sup> written towards the end of the former's life, Sylvia says of Lansbury

'...to my dismay (he) resigned his seat to fight on the Votes for Women issue. I knew it was premature and that more work should have been done to prepare the constituency first. The local Labour Party officials had not been consulted and were much annoyed'

Lansbury had paid more heed to WSPU counsels (especially that of Christabel) than to that of labour movement. Thus when an army of middle class suffragettes descended on the constituency they were met with a wall of hostility from local activists most of whom disapproved of WSPU politics anyway. Hence despite some well attended public meetings, canvassing was poorly organised. Sylvia's more fundamental criticism of Lansbury concerned her opposition to his tactics within the parliamentary Labour Party. Thus far from cementing the labour-suffrage alliance, Lansbury's campaign, which ended in failure, damaged it still further without bringing tangible results to the women's cause other than short-lived publicity. Presumably this explains why the result did not matter to Christabel. Writing from her safe refuge in Paris, she expressed the view that 'whatever the result the fight has been gloriously worthwhile and has done untold good'<sup>18</sup> Once the election was over the WSPU decamped from the East End, adding further fuel to the prevalent opinion that they had used the local community as an election stunt and were not in the least interested in the plight of working class women.

#### 1914-1918: HUMAN SUFFRAGE

Throughout the war Sylvia's organisation (after she and it were expelled from the WSPU) the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), distinguished itself in maintaining its commitment to its original purpose - the fight for women's suffrage. Given the vast array of other activities in which it was involved it would have been easy to lose sight of this. The issue of Human Suffrage now emerged as an important campaigning demand, attracting support from the labour left. It had profound repercussions on the ELFS in that it changed its orientation away from being a predominantly women's suffrage organisation. Although the ELFS had never concentrated exclusively on women's suffrage, the very fact that it retained the word 'suffragette' in its title was a clear indication of its antecedents and current orientation. When, in 1916, Asquith announced that his government would introduce full adult suffrage after the war, it was clear that campaigning on women's suffrage alone was inappropriate. Sylvia wrote a long article for the *Dreadnought* entitled 'Why Wait?'<sup>19</sup> in which she analysed the history of the women's suffrage movement and criticised its failure to demand votes for all women.

She then went on to raise the demand for Human Suffrage and anticipated the feminist counter arguments which might be used against this. Why should women help more men get the vote when men are already in a powerful position? Will not this result in women being used as campaign fodder once again? Her answer to this was that such a possibility was highly unlikely given the strength of the women's movement in Britain and that international examples showed that women got the vote only when property qualifications for men have been abolished.

Clearly in the circumstances of 1916 when a full commitment to adult suffrage had been announced by the government, this change in the policy of the ELFS was entirely understandable. However, it has attracted surprisingly little comment given the obvious implications it had for the future of the organisation and the bitter controversy in the past within the women's movement and between the women's movement and the labour movement on the issue of adult suffrage. Certainly it represented a logical progression for Sylvia who, as we have seen, had for a long time been uncomfortable with the traditional women only suffrage demand. Now, in the Britain of 1916, all the champions of the traditional demand had deserted the cause entirely and threw their energies behind the war effort. This left the way clear for a revival of the Adultist position, only this time no-one could suspect this was a ploy to 'sell out' women. Human Suffrage meant what it said, and, more importantly, those who advocated it were fully committed to its meaning.

In 1917 the Workers' Suffrage Federation (as the ELFS was now called) stated that no measure was acceptable unless it provided for complete adult suffrage and that the WSF would only co-operate with those organisations sharing a similar aim. This precipitated a stormy debate in the National Council for Adult Suffrage to which Sylvia's Joint Demonstration Committee was affiliated. This organisation was established in 1915 and held its first meeting at the Herald offices. It appears to be an attempt to establish a broad based activist adult suffrage campaigning group linking the left wing of the women's movement with the left wing of the labour movement.

The government's Franchise Bill, introduced in 1917, was, of course, unacceptable to the WSF and to all socialists since although, for the first time women were included in its provisions, it nonetheless proposed to enfranchise only women over 30 on the basis of a small property qualification. It was a shabby all party compromise which explicitly rejected the principle of equal suffrage in favour of the safer bet of enfranchising older women on the presumption that they were likely to be wives and mothers. This, of course, was a strange reversal of the 19th century constitutionalists' suffrage demand which sought to exclude married women on the grounds that women lost the right to an independent role on wedlock. It would thus appear to demolish the oft-repeated argument that women gained the vote as a reward for their war work since it was younger, single women who were the most directly active in this regard- as workers in munitions factories or as nurses in the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VAD's). Such women were explicitly excluded.<sup>20</sup>

Sylvia was almost the only feminist voice in opposition to the Franchise Bill. However, its anti-egalitarianism was not the only reason for her antipathy towards it. She saw that the government's motive was to take the sting out of any further agitation on the question by leaving it 'in the hands of the ladies he had seen' - that is the 'well dressed' women of the 'respectable' suffrage societies. There is some credence in this argument especially in view of the fact that the 'well dressed' element had, during the war, according to Martin Pugh contributed to 're-awakening conventional notions about the separate spheres',<sup>21</sup> and this 'in spite of, or even because of the unusual wartime roles performed by women'.<sup>22</sup> The behaviour of politicians, supported since 1914 by women like Mrs Pankhurst served to confirm the traditional view that women's role was in the family- a role which had been interrupted by the exigencies of war. This was the safe bedrock on which the 'land fit for heroes' was to be built. But there was an additional reason for Sylvia's antipathy to the bill which is to be found in her changed attitude to the parliamentary process itself. It was not simply that the WSF was now firmly committed to adult suffrage on a democratic basis. The WSF's May 1917 conference also supported 'the recall and election of ministers and judges by referendum vote'.<sup>23</sup> Such a demand, a moderate foretaste of things to come, clearly

distanced the WSF from the main suffrage organisations and it was from this time onwards excluded from them. The WSF was not unduly bothered by this and resolved 'that we go on as before...trusting no society but ourselves'<sup>24</sup> Notwithstanding this the WSF continued to campaign for 'human suffrage', a position symbolised by the change in name to the Workers' Suffrage Federation in 1916 and the change in name of the paper to the Workers' Dreadnought in 1917.

From this time onward there is little mention of the suffrage question in the Workers' Dreadnought or in the minutes of the WSF despite the fact that the Bill, enfranchising women over the age of 30 gained Royal assent in February 1918. For Sylvia this was not a great victory for women and not a matter for rejoicing. She pointed out that 'less than half the women will get the vote by the new Act...the new Act does not remove the sex disability; it does not establish equal suffrage'<sup>25</sup> however even if the franchise had been granted in full measure 'it could not seem to us as great joy-giving boon in these sad days' given the awful horrors of the war. Later in the year little coverage was accorded to the first General Election in which women could participate. Seventeen women stood as candidates, one of whom was Sylvia's sister Christabel who stood for her newly formed and very short lived Women's Party.<sup>26</sup> Only four women stood as Labour candidates, none as Conservatives,<sup>27</sup>. The remainder who stood as Independents and Liberals, were certainly not progressive with the exception of the revolutionary Sinn Fein candidate who had fought in the 1916 Easter Rising, Countess Constance Markiewicz. She was the only woman to be elected in 1918, although she refused to take her seat as a protest against British rule in Ireland. Certainly the election was a great disappointment for women, especially for radical suffragists since the Labour Party, which had seemed such a hopeful prospect before the war, had adopted such a small number of women candidates. But this fact alone does not account for the WSF's lack of attention to the election. The explanation for this curious silence, which stands in such sharp contrast to the previous years of painstaking coverage and militant campaigning, is to be found in Sylvia's increased disillusionment with the parliamentary process. This was expressed in an important article she

wrote entitled 'Parliament Doomed'.<sup>28</sup> In it she advanced the view that parliament's decision to enfranchise women was made not, as was usually supposed, as a reward for war work. It was motivated by fear of Bolshevism. The women who enter parliament she argued, whatever their politics, 'will go in and play the sad old party game that achieves so little' whereas those who remain outside, 'the more active and independent women' remain 'a discontented crowd of rebels'. These rebels are waiting for the Soviets to replace parliament, which, according to Sylvia, had now become an outdated 19th century institution. She did not go as far as some (eg the Socialist Labour Party) in advocating a 'Don't Vote' position, but she expressed surprise when she learned that she had been mentioned as a possible parliamentary candidate for the Sheffield Hallam seat. She, of course, refused on the grounds that she was 'in accord with the policy of the WSF' which 'regards parliament as an out of date machine'<sup>29</sup> In fact her stance was very close to an abstentionist one. This hostility to parliament was later to become a major hallmark of her political position, isolating her from many other socialists during the discussions on the formation of the Communist Party. For the moment, however, this stance isolated her from the mainstream of the women's movement and the labour movement both of which enthusiastically participated in the extension of the franchise, despite the fact that there were criticisms and reservations about the terms of the act. However, the tactical issues that she and others faced in the suffrage movement have great resonances for all socialist feminists activists today as we struggle to reconcile the class/gender divide when it re-surfaces with uncanny regularity in the continuing campaign for women's equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Labour Leader 15th August 1904

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 9th September 1904

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the Co-Operative News December 10th 1904 (Gertrude Tuckwell Collection)

<sup>4</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>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. At the end of the debate the motion, 'that the immediate granting of the Parliamentary franchise to women on the same terms as it is or may be granted to men is the speediest and most practical way to real democracy', was carried by 171 votes in favour to 139 against.

<sup>10</sup> E.Sylvia Pankhurst The Suffragette Movement op cit p.203

<sup>11</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>12</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>13</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>14</sup> Jill Liddington *The Life & Times of a RSylvia Pankhurst* *Rebel: Selina Cooper* (Virago, 1984)

<sup>15</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst The Suffragette Movement op.cit.p.248

<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* p423

<sup>17</sup> TBG papers op.cit

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Lansbury 24th(?) November 1912, Lansbury Collection op.cit

<sup>19</sup> Woman's Dreadnought, January 22nd 1916

<sup>20</sup> WSF minutes 26th May 1917

<sup>21</sup> M.Pugh *Women and the Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959*, Macmillan 1992, p.38. Pugh discusses a variety of possible explanations to account for the inclusion of women on the 1917 Bill. Sylvia's view, strangely, is not one of them.

<sup>22</sup> M.Pugh *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Workers' Dreadnought 2nd June 1917

<sup>24</sup> WSF minutes 26th May 1917

<sup>25</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, 'Look to the Future', Workers' Dreadnought, 16th February 1918

<sup>26</sup> DSylvia Pankhurst *its title this was not a feminist party*. It was funded by the British Commonwealth Union, backed by the Coalition and by the conservative press.

<sup>27</sup> The following year (1919) Lady Astor entered parliament as a Conservative- she was not elected, she took over her husband's Commons seat when he entered the House of Lords.

<sup>28</sup> Workers' Dreadnought 2nd November 1918

<sup>29</sup> Workers' Dreadnought December 7th 1918