**Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Lecture 17 August 2024 at Wortley Hall**



*Left to right: Suki Sangha, Philippa Clark, Mary Davis*

**Philippa Clark’s introduction**

Thank you for coming to hear about Sylvia Pankhurst ***Speaking Out On Race***

I’m the Warm Up act for our two stimulating speakers so want to set tonight’s topic in the context of:

* Campaigning for A Statue for Sylvia
* Speaking Out Against Racism
* A contradiction for the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee
* The Statue

People hear the name Pankhurst and immediately think of the Suffragettes and Votes for Women in which Sylvia played a leading part – imprisoned and tortured by force feeding

She differed from her mother and sister who expelled her from the Suffragette movement which is why she does not figure on the memorial adjacent to the House of Lords. Sylvia was a socialist, an internationalist. These are aspects of her campaigning life that are less well known and which were the motivation for a statue.

In recent years there’s been a lot said about the value/merit of Statues. From the outset we were clear – our reason for a statue was not simply to eulogise or venerate Sylvia Pankhurst.

She would have disapproved of this. We wanted a beacon to her beliefs, the campaigns she embraced and to which she tirelessly devoted her life – Equality and Justice for all peoples of the world. She was among the first to speak out against colonialism and fascism. She spoke to non-segregated audiences in the USA, engaged with emergent black African  liberation leaders, employed the first black journalist in the UK.

I learned about Sylvia’s prescient anti racism from Mary’s book *Sylvia Pankhurst – A Life In Radical Politics.* Very pleased that we have Mary here to elaborate on Sylvia’s anti racism in action. It’s often said that the price of Liberty is eternal vigilance, our objective is that the statue inspires present and future generations to be vigilant, to always Speak Out

**Speaking Out**

Tonight’s subject is timely. In the General Election, Reform took 14.3% of the overall vote. They came second in 98 parliamentary seats. Up the road in Barnsley, once seen as a solid Labour town, they were a close second. In Barnsley North they got 29% of the vote. In Barnsley South they got 33%. That’s three in every 10 voters. (Sources; Financial Times, Times, BBC, Commons Library). Reform took votes from Labour. Much is being made of the importance for Labour to deliver improvements in the living and Employment conditions of working-class voters. Obviously! It is suggested this could go some way to diffuse racial tensions

Hopefully! However, the thugs violently physically attacking black and Asian citizens, burning a library which housed a food bank, smashing up newly built social housing, setting fire to hotels to burn people trapped inside are highly unlikely to stop their vicious, violent behaviour as long as their ignorance, their prejudices are fed by so called Leaders. The rioters in Southport, Middlesborough, Sunderland, Hartlepool, shouted racist abuse,

Stop The Boats – the slogan used time and time again by Tory politicians. Save our Children, based on lies about grooming gangs spewed across social media. People of colour were physically attacked. There was a positive response in many communities opposing the racist violence.

**Building bridges**

Imams and mosques targeted by the rioters reached out to their communities, even their persecutors. Of course it was very heartening to see communities reclaiming their streets, peacefully, demonstrating in their thousands, opposing bigotry and hatred, celebrating the diversity of their neighbours, workmates and friends. If the ideology of Farage and Robinson is to be challenged effectively then politically a distinction and tactics are necessary differentiating between the leaders and the led. Between those ideologically fascist deliberately and cynically winding up and fomenting distrust, division, inciting violence from those for whom you have to feel pity, who have been failed by the education system. But we should not be sentimental or defensive about the working class whose behaviour is excused by some because they have “legitimate grievances”. I want to refer to the author Reni Eddo Lodge and her book *Why I am no longer talking to white people about race…*

She writes: “We should be rethinking the image we conjure up when we think of a working class person. Instead of a white man in a flat cap, it’s a black woman pushing a pram. It’s worth questioning exactly who wins from the suggestion that the only working-class people worth our compassion are white, or that it’s black and ethnic minority people who are hoarding scant resources at the expense of white working-class people who are losing out.”

The truth is that Britain’s most economically disadvantaged communities are disproportionately non white. Every indicator whether it be in relation to education, housing, employment, healthcare, shows black, ethnic minority and Asian citizens fare worse their white counterparts. Sylvia, who worked to reduce deprivation particularly for women and children would be on the case for Black women who are four times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than their white counterparts. (Source; BMJ 2021)

Our key public services – police forces and fire authorities – are categorised as institutionally racist. May 2024 the Home Affairs Select Committee declared the Fire and Rescue Service in England to be “institutionally misogynistic, racist and homophobic”. May 2023 the Chief Constable of Scotland said “it is right …to clearly state that institutional racism, sexism, misogyny and discrimination exists” in the force. In London the police have been classed as institutionally racist time and time again – after riots in the 80s. After the murder of Stephen Lawrence. And no meaningful change has been implemented. Discrimination is deeply entrenched in the force’s culture. Confidence in those policing London, and in the police in general is at an all-time low. Bigotry impacts negatively on the daily experience of women, gay and lesbian staff and those of colour employed in these services. So of course it impacts negatively on the quality of service which should be delivered equally to all citizens

At the end of July 15,000 people marched to Trafalgar Square under the banners of the far right in various guises pretending to be patriots – shouting out that they were all constituents/supporters of Nigel Farage (Source Hope not Hate). The poet Michael Rosen has written:

Fascism arrives as your friend.

It will restore your honour,

make you feel proud,

protect your house,

give you a job,

clean up the neighbourhood,

remind you of how great you once were,

clear out the venal and the corrupt,

remove anything you feel is unlike you

It doesn’t walk in saying,

“Our programme means militias, mass imprisonments, transportations, war and persecution”.

In Germany in the 20s and 30s Nazis were called National Socialists, a large number of whom were anti-capitalist, who wanted to create a nationalist redefinition of socialism. In 1932, 230 members of the Nazi Party, 38% of the vote, were elected to the Reichstag. Reform has five MPs in the House of Commons. Reform is a racist party.

**The Contradiction**

When we first began the – as it’s turned-out, epic – journey to raise A Statue for Sylvia all four of us were active in the trade union movement. Four socialist women, two white, one Jewish, one Quadroon, a 1/4 Black. We connected with black comrades through our trade unions. However, we have not engaged in any meaningful way with black and ethnic minority communities and organisations. So here lies the contradiction, a statue of Sylvia to inspire present and future generations to call out racism yet until tonight we have only had one black speaker delivering our annual lecture – in 21 years. We must learn from this. We appreciate Suki agreeing to come and talk with us. As an activist involved in 10 political and trade union organising, campaigning against racism, and for social justice, and I am looking forward to the discussion after hearing our speakers.

In conclusion Reni Eddo Lodge writes that it shouldn’t be left to black and ethnic minority communities to carry the burden of racism – white people need to take up that burden. The inspirational Angela Davis said:

“In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be anti-racist”

**Mary Davis’ speech: RACE & CLASS**

This lecture based on following propositions

* Racism permeated British society including women’s movement, L&M & even socialist organisations
* Linked to British imperialism
* ESP ‘got it’ – one of the few

Now I need to prove this:

Sylvia Pankhurst is known primarily as a socialist feminist. However, one aspect of her work which has received scant attention is that of anti-racism. She showed in her writing and action that she had an understanding of race oppression which was unusual, if not unique, for a white political activist of her time.

She lived during the heyday 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.

The ideology of racism had underpinned slavery and hence was not a new phenomenon. In the period of imperialist expansion, however, it was dressed up in a new pseudo-scientific garb and given a populist mass appeal. There was ample opportunity to disseminate the ideology given that the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a great expansion, formally and informally, of the ideological apparatus of the state which was both prompted and facilitated by the rise in literacy

**Imperial ideology, eugenics and racism**

* Expanded mass culture coincided with mass empire expansion
* Kidd, Pearson, Galton et al
* Race motherhood
* Fear of socialism – impact on burgeoning socialist movement
* Social imperialism – Cecil Rhodes

Volumes of ‘scholarly’ writings appeared to provide some kind of intellectual justification of British racial superiority. The feminist-eugenicist argument centred around the concern that race mothers, in order to fulfil their historic mission, needed to be educated and aware. Women’s independence, provided it did not contradict motherhood, could be seen as a useful eugenic tool in that it would result in more suitable, well-matched marriages which would produce stronger stock. Concern for the Empire and the survival of the British race undoubtedly had an impact on the women’s movement. There are frequent references in suffrage literature to women’s role as race mothers. Indeed one of the arguments used by both the NUWSS and the WSPU to justify the demand for women’s enfranchisement was that women needed the vote in order to ensure that parliament paid proper attention to the maintenance and survival of a healthy race. Strongly opposed by ESP

**IMPERIALISM, THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND ESP**

Thus it was that imperialism, in an atmosphere of heightened national and racial chauvinism, was able, through the skilful use of popular culture, to employ an ideology and practice with outspokenly racist overtones. Undoubtedly the effect of this was to make it much harder for a comparatively weak socialist movement to gain much ground.

The attitude of the mainstream labour movement leadership to the Empire was at best silent on the issue and at worst aggressively pro-imperialist.

1. ESP INTERVENED DIRECTLY IN CALLING OUT THE RACISM WITHIN THE LM AS WELL
2. AS MAKING A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION IN HER OWN RIGHT TO THE ANTI-FASCIST & IMPERIALIST STRUGGLE – India, South Africa, Ethiopia, ITALY

ESP response:

* Critical of labour leadership – “many of the most powerful trade union leaders are keenly imperialist”. 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”. However, in her view this was a deep seated ideological feature of the British labour movement, not solely confined to the leadership:

**VERY IMPORTANT – shows her understanding of link between race & class**

“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.”

**TWO EGs OF ‘SOCIALIST’ RACISM**

1. Black Labour

Even during the most revolutionary phase of the history of the British labour movement, (c1910-1926), when so many values of the capitalist system were subjected to scrutiny, racism and imperialism remained comparatively unchallenged. One of the very few debates in the left press on the issue of racism appeared in *The Call* early in 1917. This was precipitated by an article on ‘Black Labour’ by Tom Quelch in which he opposed Labour MP Arthur Henderson’s proposal to introduce Black labour into Britain for the purposes of erecting munitions factories.

One reason, Quelch argued for opposing black immigration is the effect it would have on women munitions workers whose “sex appetites are... being starved” in the absence of their menfolk and who find it “impossible to repress natural desires”. The clearly stated basis for Quelch’s assertions was the commonly held view that a race problem existed because “there is a physiological difference between black and white”.

“belong to a different evolutionary epoch…” and thus “...their physical and mental characteristics are different from Europeans. It would be better if they all stayed in their own countries – the races cannot mix.”

1. ‘Black Scourge in Europe’

Sylvia must have read this correspondence since she worked very closely with the BSP. She was also aware of another racist diatribe emanating from the left. ED 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’. 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 civilisation” because their unrestrained sexual appetites impelled them to rape white women and to spread syphilis. Although he claimed to have studied this issue in depth, Morel declared that he did not need specific reports to assert the validity of his charges because it was well known that “the African race is the most developed sexually of any” and the black recruits to the French army come from “tribes in a primitive state of development...sexually they are unrestrained and unrestrainable”. Thus the *Daily Herald*, the leading socialist paper of the time and the only daily paper of the left, colluded with Morel’s age old racist stereotypical view of black men as over-sexed rapists... 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*, having been rejected by the *Daily Herald*.

**Workers Dreadnought: many articles on racism & imperialism**

* CLAUDE MCKAY: The publication of McKay’s letter in ESP’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. In fact although this letter led to his first meeting with ESP, 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’ which reported on the work of WEB 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.

* Despite his criticism of some of the quirkier 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 labour 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.’

* APARTHEID: 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.
* INDIA: Her comments on race and empire were not confined to Africa. Indian writers, for example SN Ghose, also wrote for the *Workers’ Dreadnought*. In 1926 Sylvia published a lengthy tome on India. 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. 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.’

**ANTI-FASCISM AND ETHIOPIA**

* ANTI MUSSOLINI: 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... She regarded Mussolini’s March on Rome in 1922 as marking ‘the final collapse of the post war revolutionary movement’.Such comment was not made only with the wisdom of hindsight. She wrote a long article, ‘The Truth About the Fascisti’, at the time (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.
* When, in 1932, she discovered that his widow and children were in danger, she formed the Women’s International Matteotti Committee to draw attention to their plight.
* ETHIOPIA: The second half of ESP’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’. The paper was also published in Amharic and clandestinely distributed in Ethiopia. It remained in circulation for 20 years.
* It is clear that Sylvia not only had an understanding of the significance of Ethiopia for black people, but that she also understood the importance of re-asserting African values against the imperialist counter culture. As a result she consistently supported efforts to challenge the white notion of black racial inferiority.
* Although *New Times and Ethiopia News* was primarily a campaigning paper, it also published articles of a more theoretical kind written by black academics and political leaders, dealing with the nature of imperialism and racism. One of the most important of these contributions was a remarkable two part article entitled ‘The Influence of Colonialism and Racial Conflicts on the Development and Maintenance of Free Societies’ written by Dr AK Busia, Professor of Sociology at the University College of the Gold Coast.

**PAN AFRICANISM**

Her involvement in that struggle brought her into contact with a remarkable group of Pan-Africanists resident as exiles in London. These included Ras Makonnen, CLR James, Jomo Kenyatta, ITA Wallace Johnson and George Padmore. In 1937 Padmore and Wallace Johnson founded the International African Service Bureau (IASB) . The motto of the IASB was ‘educate, co-operate, emancipate – neutral in nothing affecting the African people’. Sylvia was a member of the IASB committee of associates for a time – the only woman among six men.

In 1960, aged 74, Sylvia accepted an in invitation issued by the Ethiopian government, to live there. She was an honoured guest- her work in supporting Ethiopian independence was well known: a street in Addis Ababa had been named after her and, on her second visit in 1951, she had been presented with the country’s highest decoration. When she died in Ethiopia in 1960 at the age of 78 she was given a state funeral.

**Suki Sangha – Deeds not Words**

**INTRODUCTION AND THANK YOU**

I just want to begin by saying thank you for the invitation to speak at this year’s memorial lecture, it’s a real honour and through the invitation itself I’m learning more about the campaigning work and struggles that Sylvia Pankhurst was involved in. For all the reasons already outlined this is a really timely discussion about how we understand and address the current threat posed by the far-right.

**WHAT I AM GOING TO TALK ABOUT**

I want to touch briefly on a couple of areas as part of my contribution today:

Firstly, I’m interested in how working-class resistance is defined across Britian and as part of the trade union and labour movement. I want to look at the causes of the depoliticisation and liberal co-option of the anti-racist struggle in recent years and then I want to look at the anti-racist and anti-imperialist movement today.

**MY POLITICISATION**

I became politically active around the anti-war movement and my inroads into political activism and the trade union movement was deeply influenced by Britain and America’s war on Iraq and Afghanistan. We weren’t fighting the Tories, but it was Labour who were complicit in the bombing of innocent men, women and children. And that anger and disillusionment with a party which was meant to do better has had a profound and lasting impact on how I and others around me see and interpret the world. You’ll sometimes hear said “we’re here because you were there” and it speaks to Britain’s colonising of countries and cultures across the globe. Understanding imperialism and the role it plays under our current political and economic system is so fundamental in understanding Britain’s domestic policies, its foreign policies and of course the various extensions of the state including the mass media and the role of the police. It’s fundamental to understanding Britain’s uncomfortable relationship with race and how easy it becomes to scapegoat entire communities.

**OUR COMMUNITIES HAVE LONG BEEN PART OF RESISTING AND ORGANSING**

Black and Asian communities have been part of working-class resistance movements in defence of their communities for a very long time in Britain. I think the work that Taj Ali co-editor of *Tribune Magazine* is doing currently is incredibly important. As part of the book, he will release next year titled *Come What May, We’re Here to Stay* he’s documenting the voices, stories and activism of South Asian communities which if not recorded now will be lost forever. And he’s not the only one. These stories have for far too long been hidden so it’s so important we’re hearing more about them now. For as long as I can remember the most notable story of Black and Asian people resisting in the trade union movement, that I kept hearing about was the story of the Grunwick strike. People will be familiar with the struggle of the predominantly South Asian women workers in a photo processing plant in London. In 1976 they fought back against poor working conditions, for the right to trade union recognition and against racist intimidation – all at a time when racism was also fairly open in the trade union movement. The dispute is remembered for the solidarity that was forged between British born workers and workers who had moved to Britain. We often hear that that strike changed the face of the British trade union movement. And I don’t want to take anything away from the workers who were defiant and fought back or sections of our movement who have fought to preserve the legacy of that struggle but why is Grunwick still amongst just a tiny minority of stories of Black and Asian resistance being told in the union movement?

Black and Asian communities have long been part of political organising in Britian. I don’t know how many people watched the recent Channel 4 documentary *Defiance*. It shines a light on the struggles endured by the South Asian community in the 1970s and hears from those on the front line who organised within their communities to fight the growing threat of the far right but also the racism of the state. You hear about their tactics for confronting the far-right but also of how they kept their communities safe, how they built broader working class coalitions and how they campaigned to free those imprisoned. These are all vital when you consider the threats we face now. The most significant thing here for me is the broadening out of our understanding of what the working class looks like in Britain both historically and now. The working class has always included the contribution of Black and Asian people. When people speak about the war dead in Britain, it is done from a very white British perspective, they forget the role of Indian soldiers, of soldiers from colonised lands who were promised their country’s freedom if they fought for Britain. But of course, we know this is done deliberately, if the supposed “war on terror” has taught us anything then it’s that they need to create the enemy at home in order to justify the wars abroad. And in Britain you see that play out with the scapegoating and targeting of the Muslim community and other black and brown communities by association.

**MOVEMENT FAILINGS**

We know the tactics of the state yet why do we continuously fail when it comes to building working class power across different racialised communities?

I’m going to speak about just a couple of examples.

Firstly, I think we’ve seen a huge shift from thinking about collective struggles to struggles that have become far more individualised and identity driven. I think there has been a huge political erosion in the way we tackle racism which has for many years now become far more about celebrating cultural differences that taking on the more political arguments around the nature of the state and the role of racism as a tactic of division within the capitalist system. I think that shift now means communities that would have in the past been far more aligned around common struggles are now far more fragmented or rather organised around narrower lines. I think the state absolutely plays a role in that and in the way it allocates funding to different communities and the depoliticisation of the way we organise in the community. You could probably argue the same in terms of state funding for trade unions and how that influences the relationship between the state and worker organisations.

You can see that in the way sections of the left and trade unions organise too – so annual marches and celebrations around human rights and unity in the absence of thinking strategically about the threats we routinely face now and how we have the difficult conversations in our communities. And of course, I’m not oblivious to the fact that our sense of community has changed, we aren’t all linked to our geographical community in the same way as people once were. But we also can’t just speak to Black and Asian communities when it comes to organising against racism but rather those links and relationships should be forged already around struggles for better housing, for decent wages, for an end to austerity, for better services locally.

Where we give up ground the far-right gain an opportunity to grow resentment and fuel their racist narrative. You can see that in way the far-right have co-opted anti-establishment messaging and in the use of slogans like “Enough is Enough”, which only months ago were the slogans we were using on the back of the huge strike waves in this country. You can absolutely see the relationship between our movements failure to build a coherent campaign which challenges the status quo and gives people hope and the vacuum that leaves for the far-right to claim.

The shifts in the trade union movement are also interesting. We’ve shifted away from the overt racism of the past but what’s replaced it is a deep polarisation between the industrial work of a union and then the organisation of the minority groups within the union amongst their different equality strands. And I appreciate that many people fought to have spaces to organise as a result of the racism they have endured in our movement, but I also think it has resulted in far more tokenistic approach to representation which does nothing to build class consciousness and doesn’t see minority groups as a core part of the working class.

And the last example I’ll draw on is the deliberate reluctance of the labour movement in taking on difficult questions because they fear losing members. If we’re serious about anti-racism and our opposition to war, then why are British workers building bombs being used to obliterate the Palestinians. Why are trade union leaders reluctant to oppose the building of weapons of mass destruction? Why were British trade unions so comfortable with expressing solidarity with Ukraine but took days/weeks to put out statements expressing their disgust over Israel’s bombardment of Gaza? It took even longer to call it at genocide. These are all incredibly frustrating positions but as socialists within our trade unions we persist because we must.

**RAISING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS**

We know that the collective strength of organised workers is the greatest threat to this capitalist system, but we also understand the contradictions that exist within it. The current threat posed by the far-right was predictable. It comes as no surprise that after years of migrant scapegoating that we’re seeing violence directed at hotels accommodating asylum seekers; it comes as no surprise that Mosques are targets after years of growing islamophobia fuelled by successive governments in an attempt to justify their activities in the Middle East and it comes as no surprise that ordinary people are angry, are alienated and isolated from any sense of hope after years of austerity and tory-cuts which have decimated communities and eroded any sense of working class community, cultural expression and belonging. All these conditions can breed resentment in the absence of solidarity.

Therefore, we need to organise far deeper. Mobilisations against the far-right are simply not going to be enough. We need to win people knowing that class consciousness is uneven which means having difficult conversations. Recognising that different people will have different roles to play as part of the struggle. Building wider class solidarity beyond individual identities is going to be important. Establishing political education in an age of disinformation and building greater links and broad-based coalitions that build working class power. And as has been the case throughout history ordinary people on the streets can change the course of history and not the politicians or those at the top of institutions.

I think we’re in an incredibly difficult period and the threat of the far-right is serious as well as scary. I think we’re seeing huge levels of politicisation taking place amongst younger generations who we see leading Palestine solidarity marches and who are connecting the dots between our own government’s complicity with the relentless Israeli bombardment of the Palestinians and the demonisation and racist rhetoric they are experiencing at home. We need to learn from those who are rooted in their communities and have the legitimacy to win and lead.

We need to be able to articulate a vision of community and of hope for those who are tempted by the racist rhetoric of the far-right. Fascism can only be defeated by class solidarity and therefore the workers movement will need to remember the lessons of the past and move with some urgency in the coming weeks and months.

Sylvia Pankhurst wanted to be remembered as a citizen of the world. She gave a platform to Black intellectuals at a time that no one else would. Her legacy as part of the anti-racist and anti-fascist movement is an important reminder of the contribution that each and every one of us can make in building the kind of world we all want to be part of. And I think we have a duty to ensure that the most radical elements of our history are not forgotten or co-opted and that they help inform the activism of those who fight today.

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.”