

SPMC ANNUAL

MEMORIAL LECTURE 2026

The Campaign for a Statue to
Sylvia Pankhurst

WOMEN AGAINST THE FAR RIGHT

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Lecture by
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Thank you for inviting me to deliver this year's Sylvia Pankhurst memorial lecture. It is an absolute honour and privilege to reflect on her legacy and what it means for all of us, particularly in the current political crisis caused by an unprecedented right-wing resurgence.

I don't suppose many of us could have predicted the speed with which the far right has gained ascendancy worldwide in the last decade or so. But what makes the resurgence particularly alarming is that it is no longer contained at the fringes but has been mainstreamed by state policies and fuelled by social media and the spread of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories, which in the West often tends to revolve around racist anti-migrant discourse, irrespective of the government in power.

In the UK, we first woke up to widespread far-right violence in August 2024 following the horrific killings of three young girls – Elsie Dot Stancombe, Alice DaSilva Aguiar and Bebe King – by Axel Rudukubana, an 18-year-old British citizen of Rwandan origins. His senseless and misogynist violence against the girls became the focal point for race riots that were also fanned by right-wing politicians like Nigel Farage who utilised the issue and other grievances to mainstream an extreme ethno-nationalist, racist and misogynist agenda in the wider political discourse with the aim

of destroying the plural and democratic fabric of society. Right-wing populism has emboldened far-right groups to play on the fears of the white working classes, vast swathes of which feel either culturally aggrieved or economically left behind. (The latter with some justification.) Driven by a siege mentality and convinced of their marginalisation in their own country, their answer is to engage in what they believe to be justified political violence.

Two years on from the 2024 riots, we have seen an escalation in far-right politics accompanied by the widespread flying of English and British flags from homes and streets across the country, all of which has generated a febrile atmosphere of violence and fear. Racist protests and pogroms against migrants, Muslims and other minorities have become a regular occurrence, as we saw in Southampton in June this year, following the horrific killing of Henry Nowak by a British Sikh man, and in Northern Ireland, following a stabbing attack by a Sudanese asylum seeker. In Northern Ireland in particular, the racial violence was ramped up to another level with the torching of homes and cars belonging to minorities in ways that constituted a grave danger to their lives. I should add that the widespread anti-migrant racism has also been fanned by the likes of Elon Musk, who, according to *The Guardian*, has posted twice as often about race and immigration in the UK, on his social media network, than about the achievements of his own company SpaceX. Some of the far-right rhetoric and violence has taken on Christian nationalist overtones.

At the same time, in response, the government has capitulated to an ever-increasing authoritarian agenda largely set by the far right, resulting in a clamp down on equality initiatives, the criminalisation of protest and dissent and cruel and inhumane immigration policies. What we are in effect witnessing is the rise and normalisation of right-wing identity politics that comes on the back of an abject failure to acknowledge Britain's colonial legacy, the years of neoliberal policies on austerity and privatisation and the Brexit disaster, all of which has deepened inequality and division.

Unlike the 70s and 80s, what makes the manifestation of the far right contemporaneous in form is that it uses the markers of religion, culture and nationhood, and not just colour, to divide people into the categories of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. This has the potential to radicalise a diverse range of actors, including members of ethnic minorities (particularly British Sikhs and Hindus), who are also drawn towards far-right ideology by its anti-Muslim and anti-asylum rhetoric.

Another significant characteristic of the new racism is the ways in which it has successfully appropriated the discourse around violence against women and the need to protect 'our' women and girls to stoke fears among ordinary white parents. The manipulation of such fears and anxieties has proven very effective; in 2024/5, many women were drawn to racist and far-right protests claiming they were not

racist but were merely seeking to safeguard women from migrant men. 'Protect our women and girls' was a common refrain. Paradoxically, some women adopted tactics and slogans used by the feminist movement. For example, in 2024, they organised 'pink protests' against migrants in areas across the UK. The colour pink is often associated with feminist struggle against male violence but in these protests, it was appropriated out of so-called maternal concerns, although clearly the wider goal was racist. What this tells us is that far-right groups and fascist movements in the UK and across the whole of Europe are cleaning up their act by appealing to disparate constituencies, including women, to build new political credibility that is essential to mainstreaming far-right politics. In the current situation, such rhetoric appeals to parents who, to a certain degree, understandably see the family as the only source of security and certainty in an increasingly precarious world where they feel dispossessed.

Such weaponisation of violence against women by the far-right is of course not new to the history of racial oppression. From slavery to contemporary forms of racism, the myth of hyper-sexualised black males (now also increasingly Muslim, migrant and refugee males) as sexual predators who pose a danger to white women and girls has always been a politically expedient core of white supremacist politics.

I was very struck by the fact that, in her time, Sylvia Pankhurst was also compelled to challenge stereotypes of black men as rapists, predators and abusers of women; sentiments voiced at that time, not just by the far right but also by elements of the left. As part of her anti-racist activism, she gave space to the black journalist E.D. Morel, who wrote a critical article about the deployment of black troops fighting in the First World War and how they were referred to by others. I quote as 'black savages and primitive African barbarians, perpetuating an abominable outrage upon womanhood, upon the white races and upon civilisation.'

However, there is an added sense of irony in the use of such dangerous racial narratives in the current context, because the same movement that laments violence against women and frames immigration as a direct threat to white women has no problem in promoting a wider culture of toxic masculinity in which celebrity and misogyny mix in dangerous ways to sexualise and commodify women and view them as targets of violence. Andrew Tate and his cohorts come to mind here. Recent research has also revealed that many of the far-right rioters involved in the protests have been charged and convicted of offences related to domestic abuse. In the aftermath of the Southampton attack on Henry Novak, for instance, data emerged to show that 22 out of the 37 detained men involved in the racist protests had been accused or convicted of intimate partner violence, some on multiple occasions, involving serious assaults, threats and extreme coercive and controlling behaviour. None of this comes as a surprise since the correlation between those who are

violent in public and those who are violent in intimate private spaces is now well known.

Ultimately, these contradictory developments serve not to advance women's rights but to shore up extremist far-right ideology at the centre of which lies violence against women and the maintenance of traditional family structures in which women must occupy strict, gendered roles.

The other interesting thing about these events is that at the same time, within anti-racist circles, there was little or no analysis or commentary about the gendered experience of the racial violence and its impact on black and minoritised women who were affected in multiple ways.

The exclusion of women's voices within anti-racist commentary led Project Resist to embark on research to document the complex ways in which the 2024 far-right riots affected black and minoritised women and the organisations that support them. In particular, we examined the impact on women and children from the post-industrial heartlands of the UK: areas which have seen an unprecedented surge in right-leaning populism over the past decade, as demonstrated by the success of Reform UK in the 2024 local council elections.

In our research, women spoke of how their individual sense of safety, freedom of movement and well-being in public spaces was compromised by the riots and how their fear of racial abuse was heightened. Women and children talked of being subject to increased harassment and assaults in public spaces - on the streets, in schools and on public transport. They also described experiencing increased levels of discrimination when engaging with statutory services, mostly due to the mainstreaming and normalisation of discrimination and racism that has occurred at the same time. But this reality represented only one side of the coin; the other side concerned the use of the far-right riots by religious and community forces to maintain patriarchal structures of power and control. In fact, the standout feature of our research was the ways in which women's autonomy and security were equally compromised by the imposition of greater levels of patriarchal control from within their own communities: women and girls were frequently told by male members of their families and by community leaders not to go out for their own "safety" and "protection" from the riots. But this was used as an excuse to confine them even more to their homes and to monitor their movements, which left women even more vulnerable to gender-based abuse, including domestic abuse, honour-based violence and forced marriage.

Women's heightened social control and surveillance were compounded by local authority responses to the racist violence. Even where some protection measures were considered by the police and local authorities, they did so after liaising with male community leaders and religious institutions only, thus prioritising their safety and security over the needs of women's centres and shelters that served

vulnerable women. Consequently, women frequently faced a stark choice: remain at home and suffer gender-based violence or exit and risk racial violence. The exclusion and marginalisation of women's organisations continued in the aftermath of the riots as local authorities drew up plans and made a small amount of funds available to aid recovery and rebuild community cohesion. Women's organisations yet again found themselves completely sidelined and unprotected by both the state and community leaderships.

Women who participated in anti-racist protests within local communities also felt unsafe in those spaces. Some women described how the community protests were dominated by young men who were drawn towards religious sloganeering – shouting allahu akbar. They mobilised extreme religious and misogynist ideologies and 'bro-culture' dynamics that made women uncomfortable because they recognised that these same undercurrents also produce the breeding ground for violence against women. They felt that the framing of anti-racist resistance in religious terms would reinforce a very conservative and sectarian form of identity that has profound implications for women's right to exercise choice and autonomy. It is striking to note that the kinds of secular anti-racist slogans that were used in the 70s and 80s, such as 'we are here because you were there' or 'self-defence is no offence', have been displaced by religious slogans that reinforce religious identity politics. This has very specific implications for women's rights. As one women's organisation said: "No one is looking at the wider impact of racism and how it draws young men into radicalisation and is informed by right-wing misogyny."

The question then is how do we challenge these developments when Left politics has itself become fragmented, divisive and dogmatic? We are at a political juncture where regressive identity politics have taken hold at both ends of the political spectrum - Right and Left. On the Left, it is far removed from class struggles and instead radiates forms of authoritarianism from above and from below (i.e. within our own political movements).

Post Rushdie, much of what passes as left and anti-racist politics within Asian communities especially has coalesced around religious identities that are fundamentalist and ultra-conservative in nature. By promoting multi-faith policies, both the state and community leaders have opened up spaces in which conservative and fundamentalist religious leaderships have opportunistically stepped in, making demands that largely revolve around protecting and privileging religious identity and policing dissent, while leaving intact issues of racial and structural inequality. Key themes to emerge from fundamentalist politics include the normalisation of a heightened culture of censorship, greater patriarchal control, sectarian violence and the de-secularisation of civic spaces and civic culture, all of which has greatly undermined the potential for developing solidarity and alliances based on shared political values.

The same thing is repeated in other social justice movements. Following the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, race identity politics has reduced anti-racism to a matter of white privilege (which also ignores questions of class). We have seen the corporatisation of black politics resulting in an endless obsession with identity terminology (minority, minoritised or global majority) and a focus on unconscious bias training, interpersonal relations and the removal of barriers to upward individual mobility, all of which has benefited the elite rather than address those affected by racial and structural inequality. This development has strong parallels with the discredited racial awareness training of the 1970s and 80s that moved away from grass roots political activism towards a politics that generated guilt, recrimination, splintered unity and paralysis of action.

To answer the question, I believe that a good starting point is to turn to the great history makers, those thinkers and activists whose acts of resistance offer invaluable lessons.

At the height of the civil rights movement in the US, Martin Luther King and others like Bayard Rustin understood that the anti-racist movement could not coalesce around the idea that identity politics held the key to liberation. They were acutely aware that the struggle for civil rights had to be waged side by side the struggle against poverty. Similarly, in the fight for Indian independence, Gandhi understood that political freedom without economic freedom was meaningless, which is why he also addressed the need for economic self-sufficiency.

Sylvia Pankhurst's own extraordinary history of struggle and her refusal to take the least line of resistance when demanding freedom for all is also instructive. She stood

bravely and firmly not just for women's suffrage but for universal suffrage, which meant waging a simultaneous struggle against labour exploitation, colonialism, racism, war and the patriarchy. When she said that the struggle for freedom involved casting aside differences of race, nationality and gender, she understood only too well that the struggle had to be intersectional (long before the word became fashionable), indivisible and multi-directional. I am particularly struck by her offer of conditional support to the Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie. She once told him that she did not support him because he was an emperor but because she believed in his cause against European imperialism.

I believe that feminists must lead the Left resistance against the Far Right, by transcending the limitations of identity politics and building movements based on our shared humanity and universal rights. In solidarity with trade unionists, anti-racists and other progressive forces, we must urgently return to a material analysis of class exploitation and inequality. We must challenge the willful destruction of our planet and the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of the few while billions of people are hungry, sick and homeless. Without such an analysis, we will not be able to get out of the dangerous political impasse in which we find ourselves: an impasse that has created a political vacuum in which the forces of authoritarianism, the Far Right and the Religious Right have stepped in, sowing seeds of hatred and division. Sylvia once said: 'Our fight is not just for ourselves, but for future generations; we must leave a better world for those who come after us'. The stakes could not be higher.

Thank you.

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