

# The Political Creativity of Sylvia Pankhurst

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A review of *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*, Barbara Winslow, re-issued edition published by Verso Press, 2021.

In 2021 we are witnessing an assault on voting rights, an attack on women's right to abortion, and economic and social threats to the American working class, primarily due to the Covid 19 pandemic. So it is fortuitous that Barbara Winslow's unique analysis of Sylvia Pankhurst, whose life was devoted to suffrage, women's rights and working class issues, should be reissued at just this time. (1) Socialists and feminists (and socialist feminists) can profoundly benefit from the legacy of Sylvia Pankhurst who is equally deserving of the contemporary attention given to Rosa Luxemburg and Alexandra Kollontai.

There have been several books about Sylvia Pankhurst, including the most recent bloated 900 plus page book by Rachel Holmes (2). But history can be written in many ways. Most of these books provide hagiographic and conventional views of Sylvia Pankhurst that see her origins as a suffragette as separate from her radicalism and socialism. Winslow's small but mighty 193-page book offers us a history written with an appreciation of the political *integrity* of Sylvia's life and work, connecting her early women's suffrage work to her later revolutionary socialism, emphasizing Pankhurst's commitment to rank and file movements, and her belief in the importance of democracy in all political efforts. It is this connection that provides readers the opportunity to consider the nature of our own politics, and the nature of the socialism we envision. Both Winslow and Sheila Rowbotham, who wrote the book's introduction, point out that Sylvia Pankhurst's story raises issues about the relation of gender and class, about the meaning of socialist feminism and about the persistence of male chauvinism in the socialist left. I believe this book raises further issues about the tactics we use, about the relation of socialists and the electoral process, and about what

socialism “from below” means today.

## **Her Life and Times**

The broad outlines of Sylvia Pankhurst’s life are fairly well known. She was born into a progressive Victorian home. This was a time that saw the partial enfranchisement of the working-class male, the rise of industrialism and urbanization with concomitant rises in urban poverty and the development of slums. Women’s colleges were opening, and the Labour Party grew. Both of Sylvia’s parents, Emmeline and Richard were suffragists, and supporters of the Labour Party, but ultimately joined the more radical Independent Labour Party (ILP) They supported home rule for the Irish, independence for India, women’s suffrage, abolition of slavery. The home Sylvia grew up in was a meeting place for intellectuals, writers, socialists—including Keir Hardie, Louise Michel, William Morris and Harriet Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Many of the people she met during her childhood had great influence on the evolution of her own politics, particularly Keir Hardie and William Morris. Emmeline and two of her daughters, Christobel and Sylvia, were firm suffragists, and Emmeline and Christobel later founded the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).

Around 1911 or 12, Sylvia Pankhurst moved to the East End of London, to commit herself to the needs of working-class women in that community and to build a socialist women’s movement. She eventually formed the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) as a branch of the WSPU. By 1913, however, she broke with her mother and sister, Emmeline and Christobel, and their organization, the WSPU, over the issues of a) the importance of class in the suffragist movement, rejecting the middle-class predominance of the WSPU, b) the WSPU’s rejection of working with trade unions, and its unwillingness to work with men at all, and c) the WSPU’s support of the first world war. Sylvia remained estranged from her mother and sister for the rest of her life.

The independent ELFS was a radical and militant working-class organization which saw itself as part of the labor movement. The organization worked for the unionization of working women, childcare, equal pay and greater participation of working women in society. Symbolic of the increasing militancy of the East End women were its name changes. In 1916 ELFS became the Workers Suffrage Federation, and in 1918, the Workers’ Socialist Federation. The newspaper which Sylvia had created, *The Women’s Dreadnaught*, became *The Workers’ Dreadnaught*. (3) *The Workers’ Dreadnaught* published the writing of women from the East End community, but also articles from socialists both in Britain and internationally, such as James Connolly, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Alexandra Kollontai, Antonio Gramsci, Amadeo Bordiga, Herman Gorter and Anton Pannekoek.

## **An Ultra-Leftist?**

For some traditional Marxists, Sylvia Pankhurst is known only from Lenin’s attack on her abstentionist position regarding participation of socialists in parliament and trade unions in his 1920 book, *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Winslow’s book allows us to look at Pankhurst’s abstentionist position and the controversy with Lenin from a more historical perspective.

Winslow shows that Pankhurst went beyond rebellion to become a revolutionary with a vision of socialism that came from her direct experience as an activist among the working-class women of London’s East End; as such she believed in a transformative process which would enable working women to participate in creating a socialist society. Pankhurst wrote in the executive minutes of the ELFS, “We must get members to work for themselves and let them feel they are working for their own emancipation.” Pankhurst wrote in her book, *The Suffragette Movement*, that she wanted working women “to be fighters on their own account...demanding for themselves and their families a

full share of the benefits of civilization and progress.” As Winslow puts it, “Pankhurst interpreted socialism as working-class self emancipation.” (4)

Pankhurst was not always an abstentionist. But while working with the East End organization and strengthening her belief in workers’ control and in localized forms of socialism, Pankhurst came up against the intransigent opposition of Parliament and of the Trade Union leadership on multiple occasions. In 1913 a “Women’s May Day” was declared, drawing thousands of women into the streets. Despite the turnout and the passionate speeches, the women were met only with more government oppression, and the banning of suffragette meetings. The ELFS and trade union groups protested council acts to refuse the use of public halls for suffragette meetings. They asked for a deputation for the council to hear the issues. The Council met with the women but refused to alter the policy.

In 1914 women again requested a deputation in protest of the inhumane conditions of arrested suffragettes. They met with Herbert Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister. Asquith promised to give women’s suffrage “most careful and mature consideration,” but never drafted a women’s suffrage bill. Later that year, as England entered the war, the government passed the Defense of Realm Act (DORA), making it illegal to spread information that might alarm anyone in the general population or in the military. This act allowed arrests without warrant and the power to search homes. The National Register Act made it compulsory for all citizens to supply the government with details of their lives and the type of work they did. ELFS again protested DORA and the registration act, with no effect on government. A 1917 anti-war picket of the Labour Party was met with verbal abuse from Labour Party members.

All this first-hand negative experience with the government and the Labour Party convinced Pankhurst of the futility of working with them. Further, the 1917 Russian Revolution had a profound effect on Pankhurst, who, like many socialists in Western European countries, was inspired by the power of the soviets. By 1918 Pankhurst and the Worker’s Socialist Federation took an anti-electoral, anti-parliamentary, abstentionist position, and opposed leadership of the trade unions, advocating instead a form of soviets, or worker’s committees, to establish workers’ control. Pankhurst wrote in the *Workers’ Dreadnaught*, “trade union officialdom is becoming a mere parasite on the workers’ movement.” These positions were held by many Western European socialists, such as Gramsci and Bordiga in Italy, and Herman Gorter and Anton Pannekoek in the Netherlands. This group, supporting workshop committees with control of production and policy, became known as the Council Communists. (5) (6)

Sylvia Pankhurst’s own vision of worker’s control took the form of “Social Soviets”, a way to integrate feminism and communism, something none of the other Council Communists had considered: “These are the workshop committees of the mothers, for the streets and the houses they live and work in are their workshops. The women must organize themselves and their families and to help in the general struggle of the working class to conquer the power of government.” (*Workers’ Dreadnaught*)

The social soviets were to support daycare centers, better housing, public restaurants, medical care, communal laundries, and equal pay for equal work, all issues which most socialists had ignored. Winslow notes limits to Pankhurst’s vision, in that Sylvia Pankhurst did not grapple with the issue of the sexual division of labor, which was not to be discussed for 40 or 50 more years. Nevertheless, one can see in the social soviets early intimations of what would become the wages for housework movement, promoted by Selma James and others, in the 1970’s (7). Pankhurst’s insistence on the importance of women in the working class also prefigures Nancy Fraser’s work on women’s work as part of the creation of surplus value: “Wage labour could not exist in the absence of housework, child-raising, schooling, affective care and a host of other activities which help to produce new

generations of workers and replenish existing ones.” (8)

Lenin strongly disagreed with the anti-parliamentary, abstentionist stance taken by Pankhurst and others. Pankhurst wrote a letter to Lenin, explaining the British political conditions which made parliamentary activity a poor tactic for British socialists: “The Labour movement in England is being ruined under my eyes by parliamentary and municipal politics...they totally suppress all socialist propaganda in order not to frighten the electors.” (9). The real work, she said, was amongst rank-and-file workers. (10) Despite her letter, Lenin categorized Pankhurst and others as “ultra-leftists”. In *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin said, with unmistakable condescension, that the ultra-leftists showed a lack of political experience. The Russians, he said, “who have lived through two great revolutions in the twentieth century are well aware what importance parliamentarism can have and actually does have during a revolutionary period.” This work has become accepted by mainstream and traditional Marxist-Leninists, who have thereby missed the creative and imaginative contributions made by Pankhurst and other council communists.

At the time there were several responses to *Left Wing Communism*. In a footnote, Winslow mentions Harry McShane, a Scottish revolutionary, who disagreed, and felt that Lenin relied too much on the position of the British Socialist Party (BSP). “Many of the people in the BSP,” McShane said, “were not very good.” Winslow also mentions perhaps the most comprehensive response, which came from Herman Gorter, a Dutch communist, who wrote an “Open Letter to Comrade Lenin: A Reply to *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.” (11) The gist of the counters to *Left Wing Communism* was that Lenin did not appreciate the significant differences in the historical, social and political conditions which were present in the Western European countries, primarily the historical entrenchment of capitalism, the lack of a large class of mobilized peasantry to support a revolution, and the political bankruptcy of the large trade bureaucracies. Gorter wrote, “You...wish to compel us to use bad weapons here in Western Europe...Where we want to organize the revolution on the shop floor, and on a shop floor basis, you wish to force the miserable Trade Unions on us.” Lenin discounted the work among rank-and-file workers that Pankhurst and others did and failed to recognize, or chose not to recognize, the social forces and actual observations which led to the abstentionist position. He certainly did not appreciate the power of Sylvia Pankhurst’s concepts of Social Soviets, which was an entirely original approach to revolutionary activity, and was the result of her life’s activities in working class organizing.

The rest, as they say, is history. Sylvia Pankhurst supported the *Worker’s* Opposition—the entire manifesto of which was published in the *Workers’ Dreadnaught*. Pankhurst was expelled from the British Communist Party in 1921. But Winslow notes that by 1924, Pankhurst became politically isolated during working-class retreat. Pankhurst remained active in the anti-fascist and anti-colonial movements, she denounced the 1935 Moscow trials, and later opposed Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. She supported Haile Selassie and died in 1960 in Addis Ababa.

## **Her legacy**

Winslow’s book is important in its revelation of Pankhurst’s significant contributions to the integration of socialism and feminism using tactics that encouraged the self-activity of working women. Although Winslow writes that both Pankhurst’s socialism and feminism were unorthodox, “It was more utopian than scientific; she read more Morris than Marx,” still, the book reveals Pankhurst’s independence of thought and creative approach to organizing, and the prescience of many of her ideas.

Today we are *still* struggling over many of the issues Sylvia Pankhurst faced. We have not yet satisfactorily resolved the integration of feminism and socialism, or the relation of gender and class. We still aim for a socialism that adequately addresses cultural and social issues beyond merely the

economic and political. We are still discussing the relationship of socialism and electoral politics, without any real resolution. However, from the Sylvia Pankhurst we come to know from Winslow's book, I can only believe that she would have thrilled to the election of Bernadette Devlin to Parliament in 1969, and in the election of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to Congress. Pankhurst's ideas about "social soviets" can inspire us to look at rank and file organizing in new and creative ways, looking to communities as well as the shop floor. As we see how people (not necessarily all in unions) are responding to the threats of economic depression and the violation of voting and abortions rights, we can renew and re-evaluate what socialism "from below" may mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Notes

1. By way of disclaimer, in 1970 I met Barbara Winslow in London, when she was just beginning work on her study of Sylvia Pankhurst.
2. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel*, Rachel Holmes, Bloomsbury Publishing, Dec. 2020.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from the *Dreadnaught* or *Workers' Dreadnaught* are referenced in Winslow's book. All other unreferenced quotes are also referenced in the book itself.
4. Pankhurst was a trained and talented artist, and her focus on the working class was also evident in her art, which portrays women workers not as an economic category, a mass, but rather as real women in the course of their daily lives. A quick search on Google reveals some of Pankhurst's paintings displayed at the Tate. These watercolor paintings document the working and living conditions of women mill workers, and we can see that Pankhurst's art focused on seeing working people as thinking and feeling individuals, showing in their faces the humanity beneath the processes of production.
5. The worker's committees and shop floor organizing supported by these council communists bring to mind the Informal Work Groups, experienced and written about by Stan Weir, in *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working Class Organizers*, Alice and Staughton Lynd, eds.
6. *Non-Leninist Marxism: Writings on the Worker's Councils*, Red and Black Publishers, St Petersburg, Fla, 2007.
7. "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community", Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, 1972.
8. "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode", Nancy Fraser, *New Left Review*, March-April, 2014.
9. Published in *Communist International*, 1919)
10. Interestingly, in the US Eugene Debs took a similar position. In his 1918 Canton Speech he said of electoral politics: "In the Democratic and Republican parties you of the common herd are not expected to think...They do the thinking, and you do the voting."
11. Published in *Workers' Dreadnaught*, March 12, 1921.