The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?

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Abstract

During the years immediately preceding the First World War Britain experienced mass social unrest on a scale not seen since the early nineteenth century. Despite their distinctive priorities of gender and class respectively, both the women's suffrage revolt for the vote (embracing suffragettes and suffragists) and the labour unrest of 1910-14 (involving strikes in pursuit of higher wages, better working conditions and trade union recognition) utilised dramatic extra-parliamentary 'direct action' forms of militant struggle from below that represented a formidable challenge to the existing social and political order of Edwardian Britain. Although the two militant movements effectively co-existed side-by-side on parallel tracks, with a huge and frustrating gulf between them, there were nonetheless some very important linkages between the struggles of women and labour that have often been missed, ignored or downplayed by feminist and labour historians alike. This article re-examines the historical record to deploy both new and previously utilised evidence to foreground neglected aspects of the subject, reveal fresh factual insights, and provide a more detailed than hitherto available assessment of the cross-fertilisation that existed between the women's and labour movements and for the broader linking of class and gender issues, even if these were not always fully recognised, pursued or developed.

Introduction

During the years immediately preceding the First World War Britain experienced social unrest on a scale beyond anything that had occurred since the first half of the nineteenth century, embracing three different dimensions: namely a women's suffrage revolt, mass industrial and labour unrest, and an Irish nationalist struggle for independence. First, there

was the sustained inspirational struggle to force the Liberal government to give women the vote that was mounted by the suffragettes (the Women's Social and Political Union) and suffragists (including the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and other groups), which involved many thousands of women in activity that challenged the legitimacy of existing forms of parliamentary democracy as well as the stability of the British state.

The different suffrage organisations found contrasting ways to protest and employed a range of tactics. Most historical attention has focused on the suffragettes, who in their initial phase mounted an audacious militant civil disobedience campaign - which included supporters heckling MPs at public meetings, chaining themselves to railings and participating in mass demonstrations, as well as 'rushes' on parliament that were met with violent attacks by the police. In the face of the intransigence of the government and repeated failures to introduce a franchise bill, the suffragettes increasingly from 1909 onwards resorted to more extreme and dramatic forms of so-called 'Deeds Not Words', which included physical attacks on ministers in the Liberal government, coordinated mass window-smashing in London's West End, blowing up of letter boxes, setting fire to well-known buildings and country houses, and slashing of art works in galleries. Their aim was to get themselves arrested for breaking the law, refuse to pay the fines that were imposed and get sent to prison – and even be prepared to go on hunger strike in protest at being denied the status of political prisoners, notwithstanding state attempts to counter this through force-feeding – both as a means of publicising their cause and also putting pressure on the government by making the country impossible to govern. About 1,000 suffragettes were imprisoned, many of them several times (Atkinson, 2018; Meers, 2014; Pankhurst, 1977).

Simultaneous mass agitation and campaigning activities – embracing nationwide petitions, meetings, rallies, demonstrations and political lobbying - were mounted by the less well known, but in many respects equally important, suffragist movement (Liddington and Norris, 2000; Robinson, 2018).

This escalating women's franchise struggle peaked during the 'Great Labour Unrest' that swept Britain between the years 1910 and 1914. This was an unprecedented explosion of trade union militancy that involved national strikes by seafarers, dockers, railway workers, and miners that spilled over into some 4,600 strikes across many different industries and embraced somewhere between 25-30 per cent of the workforce in repeated battles with

employers for higher wages, better working conditions and trade union recognition (Cole, 1948, pp. 317-351; Clegg et al, 1964; Cronin, 1979; Holton, 1976).

Some of the most notable features of this labour unrest were that it often involved unskilled workers, including even non-unionised sections; took place independently and unofficially of the national trade union leadership whose advocacy of compromise and conciliation through negotiation was rejected by workers in favour of militant strike action from below; involved a high degree of aggressive, sometimes violent, action via mass picketing, street fighting and rioting, exacerbated by frequent attempts by the employers to introduce 'blackleg' labour and by the government's deployment of police and troops in many strike situations; embraced action by many young women workers who played an active and prominent role within a number of strikes across the country; led to a spectacular increase in union membership from 2.4 million at the end of 1909 to 4.1 million by 1914; and encouraged a process of political radicalisation inside the working class movement from which radical trade union, socialist and syndicalist activists could draw considerable support.

Meanwhile the suffrage revolt and the labour unrest coincided with the battle for Irish independence from British imperialism and the threat of civil war that arose from a reactionary counter-mobilisation against the government's proposed Home Rule Bill that was mounted by Ulster loyalists, backed by their supporters in the Conservative Party and upper echelons of the British military (Powell, 1996).

It was the conjunction of these three different rebellions – by women, workers and Irish Nationalists – that led the journalist George Dangerfield in his famous book *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935) to claim that the cumulative effect had posed a serious threat to the economic, social and political order of Edwardian Britain, with the country on the verge of revolution before the process was short-circuited by the 'providential intervention' of the First World War (p. 69). Likewise Élie Halévy (1934), who described Britain as 'on the brink of catastrophe' devoted a chapter of his book *A History of the English People* headed 'Domestic Anarchy' to the 'Syndicalist Revolt', 'the Feminist Revolt', and 'the Irish Revolt' (pp. 441-548).

Of course, many other historians, often as part of an attempt to minimise the extent of the general ferment, have argued there were no links between these 'revolts', that they were merely 'coincidental' and with their 'own independent and sufficient causes' (Meacham, 1972; Pelling, 1968; Phelps Brown, 1959; Powell, 1996; Read, 1982). Even those more

sympathetic to the Dangerfield-Halévy thesis, who have acknowledged the way the simultaneous women's, labour, and Irish Nationalist struggles posed a formidable challenge to the Liberal government, if not 'Liberalism' itself, have often viewed them as essentially discrete struggles only bound together tangentially in a diffuse and uncoordinated fashion. As Paul Foot (2005) lamented, with reference to the suffrage and labour militancy: 'The tragedy of both movements is that they ran side-by-side without appearing even to notice one another' (p. 227).

However, a common limitation with much of the labour and feminist historiography of the period is that it has usually involved compartmentalised studies of these different sets of individual movements, with only scant consideration of actual or potential linkages. The few notable exceptions to this overall fragmentary approach – for example, that have highlighted important links between suffrage and trade union struggles (Liddington and Norris: 2000; Connolly: 2013) – have tended to concentrate only on specific features, individuals and organisations in certain areas at particular moments, rather than provide any more broader overview.

This article attempts to redress this partial focus, by assessing the limits and potential of the interconnections between the suffrage and labour movements in this defining period of British history. It does so by re-examining the historical record to deploy both new and previously utilised evidence to foreground neglected aspects of the subject, reveal fresh empirical insights, and provide a systematic and more detailed analysis than hitherto available. Beyond its parameters is consideration of the way in which the labour unrest did not appear to directly coalesce with the battle for Irish independence – in part no doubt because, unlike the suffrage and workers' rebellions that were both part of developing militant social movements from *below*, the Ulster crisis over the Home Rule Bill that became manifest on the British mainland was a counter-rebellion from *above* by reactionary sections of the ruling establishment (O'Connor, 2014).

By contrast, the potential for linkages between the labour unrest and suffrage revolt appeared much more promising with significant similarities. Both operated in a context in which there appeared limited prospects for political change through the structure of parliamentary democracy, with a limited franchise that not only totally excluded all women but also around 40 per cent of (mainly unskilled) men, and with a newly-formed Labour Party that functioned inside the House of Commons essentially as a mere adjunct of the post-1906

Liberal Party government, perceived to be unwilling to effectively represent and campaign for gender and labour grievances. Both groups were drawn to the use of dramatic extra-parliamentary 'direct action' forms of struggle from below that challenged the existing order of society. In addition, both experienced determined police and state violence, including individual leaders being arrested and imprisoned for sedition and/or conspiracy.

Alas, the article presents evidence to suggest that there did indeed remain a huge and frustrating gulf between the militant labour and suffrage movements, with both effectively co-existing side-by-side on parallel tracks. But it *also* documents the way in which, despite the apparent contending priorities of organised labour and suffrage feminism, there were some important areas of overlap, dialogue and activity – often missed, ignored or downplayed by historians - that highlight the potential that existed for cross-fertilisation between the two movements and for the broader linking of class and gender issues, even if these were not always fully recognised, pursued or developed.

To begin with the article identifies some of the opposing strategic orientations of the suffragettes, on the one hand, and the trade unions, Labour Party and radical left, on the other, that negatively impacted on the development of linkages and cross-fertilisation. It then focuses on some of the positive, albeit often tenuous, links that were nevertheless made between some sections within the broader suffrage movement as a whole (embracing suffragist as well as minority suffragette elements) and sections of the trade union and socialist movement. Finally some broader conclusions are drawn about the links between gender and class, and oppression and exploitation, and the relationships between the labour, suffrage and socialist movements.

Suffragette **limitations vis-à-vis the labour movement**

The Women's Social and Political Union's adoption of militant forms of civil disobedience and direct action stood in marked contrast to what it regarded as the old-fashioned and unsuccessful campaigns of previous constitutional suffrage groups. It should be noted that, although the term 'suffragette' usually refers to the women involved in the WSPU who were regarded as extremely militant and law-breaking, while the term 'suffragist' refers to the women around the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) who were

regarded as more moderate, constitutional and law-abiding, such differences were somewhat more nuanced.

The WSPU was never a purely militant direct action body, but also engaged in more peaceful methods of propaganda, campaigning and mass demonstrations. Even though it remained a relatively small organisation, with estimates of membership varying from between 2,000 to 5,000 at any one time, the widespread popularity of the suffragette movement was evidenced by the way in which by 1910 the circulation of its weekly newspaper *Votes for Women* reached 40,000 (Atkinson, 2018, p. 190). In 1907 and 1908 it held more than 5,000 meetings across the country, many of which drew more than 1,000 attendees (Meeres, 2014, p. 41). In March 1909 7,000 people attended a rally at London's Albert Hall and over a four-to-five year period the hall was filled no fewer than 13 times. Meanwhile a WSPU 'Votes for Women' demonstration of 30,000 supporters to Hyde Park on 21 June 1908 attracted more than a quarter of a million to listen to speakers at 20 different platforms.

On the other hand, while the NUWSS generally adopted a more constitutional crusading approach that rejected the WSPU's increasingly militant and violent tactics, this did not mean some of its members were necessarily unwilling to break the law and challenge authority on occasion (Powell, 1996: 80-81). Moreover, there was also some membership fluidity between these (as well as other) different suffrage bodies, as well internal differences between leaders and individual members on various issues.

Nonetheless, despite their common commitment to the goal of winning the vote for women, there remained underlying differences in methods and tactics between them, with a number of problematic dimensions to the suffragette leaders' strategic policy orientations that had the effect (even though not all members necessarily adhered to its views) of generally hampering the WSPU's links with the labour movement in ways that were not as acute for the suffragists.

Limited women's franchise objective

The WSPU agitational slogan for a 'Votes for Women' bill was premised on the strategic aim of attempting to have the franchise extended so that it would include women on the basis of 'the same terms as men' (or so-called 'equal suffrage'). But this meant an acceptance of the

existing property qualification conditions that excluded some 40 per cent of (mainly working class) men. In other words, the suffragette's proposed women's franchise bill would mean only a small stratum of *middle class*, propertied women would win the vote (many of whom would be unlikely to be sympathetic to labour and trade union aspirations), whilst the vast majority of *working class women* would continue to be denied the vote. As even the otherwise sympathetic radical suffragist Ada Nield Chew (*The Clarion*, 16 December 1904) commented: 'The entire class of wealthy women would be enfranchised, that the great body of working women, married or single would be voteless still'.

Both the trade unions and Labour Party refused to support the WSPU's campaign and instead counterposed the far-reaching, and nominally more radical, demand for full 'adult suffrage' embracing *both* men *and* women and *without property qualification*, on the basis that female enfranchisement should come about only as part of a broader move towards a full democratic form of parliamentary representation for the working class movement.

Orientation on middle class women

While all the main suffrage groups (suffragettes and suffragists alike) attracted support from every section of society, they were largely middle class in leadership and membership composition, something that was particularly evident within the WSPU. In its first few years some local WSPU branches consciously set out to recruit working class support, for example, amongst the women workers of Lancashire, the West Midlands, and in the East End of London. Some working class women also played a very prominent role within the WSPU, for example, Mary Gawthorpe of Leeds Women's Labour League, Adelaide Knight, secretary for the WSPU's first East London branch in Canning Town, and the Oldham mill worker and trade unionist, Annie Kenney, alongside her sisters Jessie and Nell.

However, the suffragettes as a whole became increasingly middle class in composition and orientation, setting out to recruit only wealthy influential women and large numbers of middle class women, accompanied by an explicit rejection of the need for specific *working class* women's support (*Votes for Women*, 9 July 1908). As Christabel Pankhurst (1977) bluntly stated, a working women's movement was of no value since working women were 'the weakest portion of the sex…their lives were too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for contest'. Instead, they wanted 'picked women, the very strongest and most intelligent!' (p. 517). Paradoxically this call for middle class women

to fight on behalf of their weaker sisters meant working class women were increasingly marginalised and removed from the centre of the WSPU's campaign just at the very moment when there was a wave of labour unrest sweeping the country involving thousands of women workers.

Dismissal of other broader issues

In the early 1900s the Pankhurst family had been directly involved in the project to achieve independent working class representation in Parliament, and were all members of the Independent Labour Party. Indeed, for its first few years the suffragettes were an affiliate of the ILP and dependent on it for publicity, platforms at meetings and audiences, and they made some tentative steps towards winning support from within the trade union and labour movement. But after yet another promised bill calling for women's suffrage was rejected by Parliament in 1905, the WSPU began to narrowly focus on the single objective of securing 'Votes for Women' (Jackson and Taylor, 2014). This involved the dismissal of any campaign in support of other economic, social or political issues, including the fight by women workers against low pay and bad working conditions and the need for protection in the form of trade unionism. As Emmeline Pankhurst (1914) stated: 'Our members are absolutely single-minded; they concentrate all their forces on one object, political equality with men. No member of the WSPU divides her attention between suffrage and other social reforms' (p. 57).

Some individual suffragettes did continue to make links with the labour and trade union movement in their area, including Lizzie Wilson, who became secretary of a separate women's section of the Leicester branch of the mixed-sex National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives and the first women to be elected to the union's national executive (Drake, 198: 62-63; Soldon, 1978: 58; 60). But the WSPU leaders' emphatic rejection of any other issues of economic, social and political injustice, and accompanying dissociation from other reform movements, meant there was not a great deal for the suffragettes as a whole to contribute in relation to working class women's struggles over different issues in practice.

Antagonism towards strikes

When a strike wave swept across London's docks in the summer of 1911, a leading article in *Votes for Women* (25 August 1911) argued WSPU militancy was superior to such 'male' industrial unrest, and their cause more valid: 'The Suffragettes have far greater reason for

their revolt against the existing order of things….working men have votes, and by greater skill in their manipulation could gain improvements in their condition without resorting to strikes' to redress their grievances. Likewise in March 1912, when Emmeline Pankhurst was arrested for throwing stones at No. 10 Downing Street, she made a speech from the dock comparing the WSPU's militancy with that of the miners who were involved in a national strike:

> What we have done, Sir, is a fleabite as compared with what the miners in this country are doing today. They are paralysing the whole of the life of the community. They have votes, they have a constitutional means of redressing their grievances, but they are not content to rely on the constitutional means. If we had the vote, we would be constitutional (*The Woman's Journal,* 23 March 1912*)*.

At the same time, when syndicalist Tom Mann and two others were imprisoned for appealing to soldiers not to shoot their fellow workers on strike, *Votes for Women* (17 May 1912) coldly noted this offence was 'infinitely more serious' than any committed by the suffragettes, and suggested it should have been more severely punished. Even when 15,000 unorganised women factory workers in Bermondsey, South London, many of them dockers' wives and daughters, walked out on strike to demand improvements in pay and working conditions and for trade union recognition (de La Mare, 2008), *Votes for Women* (18 August 1911), while not condemning the strike, preached that the solution to starvation wages 'is the Parliamentary vote', and the WSPU leadership made no attempt to bring these women into the suffrage campaign.

As will later be explored, some individual suffragettes supported strikes, for example, the full-time Sheffield WSPU organiser Molly Murphy (1998: 27-28) who campaigned in 1913 in solidarity with Dublin locked out workers. Likewise, a *Clarion* journalist (20 June 1913) recalled meeting the WSPU's martyr Emily Wilding Davison on the street collecting money for the 1912 London dock strikers' families. But the WSPU leaders' overall hostile approach contributed to the predominant gulf that existed between the suffragette and labour movements.

Labour movement **limitations vis-à-vis the suffragettes**

Conversely, the distaste for the labour movement expressed by the suffragette leaders was matched by overwhelming opposition to the WSPU's demand for 'Votes for Women' by the

leaders of the trade unions, Labour Party and radical left, albeit there were some exceptions to this general picture.

Trade unions

As we have seen, instead of the WSPU's demand for limited women enfranchisement, the trade unions counterposed the nominally more radical demand for full 'adult suffrage'. Yet, although it sounded more democratic and radical, in a context in which two-fifths of men did not have the vote, the call for universal suffrage – or nothing - not only appeared impractical and impossibly beyond reach at this stage, but could be seen as an excuse for blocking the chance of at least some limited extension of the franchise to women in the immediate future. Such a view was reinforced by the way in which, apart from formal resolutions at annual conferences, there was the absence of any serious trade union campaigning activity for adult suffrage on behalf of the 40 per cent of men who were still denied the vote, let alone the 70 per cent of the population (including women) who were disenfranchised (Foot, 2005).

Many unions also displayed an indifference or even opposition to the inclusion of women as members of their own organisations, reflecting the deeply-held male chauvinist view of women at the time, which revolved around the traditional idea of 'separate spheres', with women's domain the home and men's the workplace. Women's increasing participation into industries previously dominated by men was often viewed as threatening the male breadwinner's 'family wage' that covered not only his needs as an individual but also those of his dependent wife and children. This led unions not only to attempt to limit or even prohibit women's work, but also to exclude women (particularly married women) from membership of their organisations (Boston, 1980; Lewenhak, 1977; Soldon, 1978). It was such deep-rooted sexist assumptions about women's primary domestic role that also framed some unions' long-standing dismissive view of the demand for women's suffrage.

By no means *all* unions adopted such a negative stance. Already in the late nineteenth century women activists, like Emma Patterson who had set up the first women's trade union in 1874 (which later became known as the Women's Trade Union League), had argued that the low pay, poor conditions and long hours experienced by women workers was the other side of the coin to their exclusion from the franchise. Therefore, she contended that as well as women being organised in trade unions to help free them from industrial tyranny, suffrage reform would help free them from the shackles of a male-dominated society (Goldman, 1974). Meanwhile some of the general labour unions that emerged from the 'New Unionism'

strike upsurge of the late 1890s that prefigured the Labour Unrest - including the famous Bryant and May match women's strike which had demonstrated how even the most downtrodden of women workers could take militant action and win - welcomed the recruitment and organisation of women workers.

Nonetheless, even progressive unions in the period leading up to the First World War opposed the limited form of female suffrage advocated by the WSPU, arguing that it would merely enfranchise the wives of their employers but not women workers themselves. For example, Margaret Bondfield, who had been assistant secretary of the National Union of Shop Assistants from 1898 to 1908 before becoming chair of the Adult Suffrage Society, favoured extending the vote to *all* adults regardless of gender or property, a position that led to her being accused of 'treachery' by the suffragettes. Bondfield (1948) wished good luck to those fighting for a 'same terms as men' suffrage bill, but added 'don't let them come and tell me that they are working for my class' (p. 83).

The National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), an all-female organisation founded by Mary Macarthur in 1906 on the model of a general labour union - open to all women in unorganised trades, or those women who were excluded from their appropriate trade union – also aligned itself with the general trade union declarations in support of universal adult suffrage, and opposed the suffragettes' proposed women's franchise bill (Drake, 1984; Hunt, 2014; 2019). Whilst recognising the necessity of a special organisational apparatus and of propaganda directed specifically at women workers, the NFWW confined its campaigning concerns within the traditional boundaries of trade union issues - such as women's low pay and bad working conditions - but made little attempt to make demands on broader social and political issues (beyond the call for universal suffrage) which related to women and which gave to their working life its particular exploited and oppressed characteristics (Gordon, 1997; Hunt, 2012).

Julia Varley, appointed in 1912 as the first ever women's organiser in the mixed-sex Workers' Union, adopted a similar stance. She had previously been a member of the WSPU, serving two spells of imprisonment for disorderly conduct and resisting police in 1907. But like Macarthur, while Varley encouraged women workers to recognise the link between the fight to win the vote and winning better conditions at work, she was also concerned to ensure that the suffrage cause never obscured the labour one, and to reassure male members of the

Workers' Union that her suffragism in no way diluted her commitment to the working class cause within the industrial relations arena (Hunt, 2012).

Labour Party

Despite a campaign inside the Labour Party for women's suffrage led by two prominent Independent Labour Party (ILP) leaders who were politically highly supportive of the suffragettes, Keir Hardie (Labour Party founder, friend of the Pankhursts and lover of Sylvia) and George Lansbury (elected as Labour MP for Bow and Bromley in 1910), Labour Party conferences instead backed full adult suffrage. While Labour had in 1906 returned 40 MPs to the Commons they were not prepared to upset their relationship with the Liberals whose polices they largely tailed. At the same time their resistance to the WSPU's limited female suffrage aspirations was motivated by nervousness about calling for women to have the vote when many working class men were excluded from the franchise, as well as concern that the enfranchisement of only better-off women could potentially increase the right-of-centre, anti-Labour Party vote and representation in parliament.

Even though the Labour Party's 1912 conference rejected the Liberal government's proposal to introduce a franchise bill that would give the vote to *more men*, while continuing to exclude *all women* (which was clearly aimed at deflecting pressure to concede to suffragette demands), it refused to support a resolution, moved by Lansbury on the advice of Christabel Pankhurst, which called for the party to oppose *all* Liberal government legislation until it introduced a bill that would give the vote to women (Jackson and Taylor, 2014). As a consequence, the WSPU now refused to support Labour Party candidates at parliamentary by-elections, heckled their speakers as if they had been Liberal Cabinet Ministers (attempting even to shout down Keir Hardie at the 1914 ILP conference), and excluded ILP women who continued to support Labour (Liddington and Norris, 2000).

By contrast, Labour's commitment to only support an extension of the franchise that *included women* was welcomed by the main suffragist organisation – the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) - which dropped its previous stance of neutrality towards political parties, and agreed an electoral pact to campaign for Labour by-election candidates running against Liberals who were not supportive of women's suffrage (Durham, 1985). It also opened the door to some NUWSS suffragists becoming more active in the Labour Party, albeit this had the effect of directing such suffrage activism away from militant direct action roots into more constitutional parliamentary channels.

Radical left

In a period when the Labour Party was a relatively marginal force and bedevilled by internal dissension, the 1910-1914 strike wave and trade union explosion provided a potential base for the widespread expansion of radical left politics beyond the merely parliamentary Labourist form, but such a development had its limitations, not least with respect to the relationship between the left and the suffrage movement.

The largest Marxist organisation in Britain at the time, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) - which became the British Socialist Party in September 1911 – while formally committed to female equality, opposed what it dubbed the suffragette's strategy of 'Votes for Ladies' and called instead for universal adult suffrage (Gordon, 1991). Their attitude to the question of women's suffrage and the more general issue of women's rights was in part shaped by a narrow determinist view of Marxism characteristic of socialist parties of the Second International at the time, which assumed that because the source of women's oppression and exploitation was an economic problem related to class relations within a capitalist society, it could only resolved by the inevitable transition to socialism (Crick, 1994).

Despite the efforts of party executive member Dora Montefiore (who had been a member of the WSPU in its early years and worked with Sylvia Pankhurst in the East End of London) and a small number of Women's Socialist Circles within some branches between 1904-11 that attempted to influence their parent body, the party overall devoted little attention to the problem of gender inequalities and discrimination in employment or society and did not involve itself as an organisation in supporting the suffrage movement (Hunt, 1996). At the same time, its leadership's dismissal of industrial struggles, as both ineffective and merely subsidiary to socialist propaganda and *political* organisation and activity, meant the SDF/BSP's ability to relate effectively to the labour unrest and women's workers struggles (despite the efforts of individuals like John Maclean in Scotland and significant internal party opposition mounted by syndicalist-influenced members across the country) was severely undermined.

The miniscule Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which emerged in 1903 as a breakaway from the SDF influenced by the ideas of the American socialist Daniel De Leon (a founder member of the Industrial Workers of the World) and the Irish socialist James Connolly, very much focused on the centrality of working class agency. But in placing exclusive emphasis

on the class struggle and revolutionary industrial unionism as the means to organise workers' economic power, replace the existing craft unions and achieve the transformation to socialism, they also precluded any conception of an arena of struggle other than the workplace (Kendall, 1969).

While they had some success in recruiting Singer sewing machine workers to its progeny body, the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), during a strike on Clydebank in 1911, the SLP ignored all non-wage-earning women (Challinor, 1977; Gordon, 1991). Even though they were formally supportive of adult suffrage, they were also highly dismissive of the value of the vote, suspicious of any focus on parliamentary change that aimed to merely 'reform capitalism', emphatically rejected the WSPU's specific advocacy of women's suffrage, and refused (like the SDF/BSP) to have anything to do with what they described as a 'bourgeois' women's movement, again with the exception of some individual members.

Meanwhile, although the emphasis placed by Tom Mann's revolutionary Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) on militant direct action from below that bypassed the orthodox bargaining machinery and 'class collaboration' of official labour leaders fell on fertile ground during the 1910-14 labour unrest, they also drew a sharp distinction between *political* action (conceived of as parliamentary politics) and the *industrial* struggle of workers. By focusing their attention virtually exclusively on the point of production and industrial struggles of workers, they ignored the way in which women's oppression cut across home and work, leading to the syndicalist's explicit subordination, if not rejection, of wider political issues, notably the campaign for women's franchise (Darlington, 2013a; 2013b). Their underlying dismissive stance towards the suffragettes became magnified in the wake of internecine disputes and organisational fragmentation during 1913 that resulted in Tom Mann's departure from the ISEL. A sectarian 'Open Letter to the WSPU' was published in *The Syndicalist* (December 1913) which claimed to offer some 'well-intentioned words of warning and advice':

> We are going to tell you, mesdames of the Women's Social and Political Union, how you may get the vote, and at the same time how you may finally enlist on your behalf the sympathy and co-operation of the working men and women of this country, with whom and by whose help alone, we are convinced, will you achieve the ultimate freedom to which you and they aspire. We ask you to cease burning empty houses and destroying letters (those of the humble with those of the great) and suggest to you that more fitting objects of your militancy may be found in the hundreds and thousands of male (and

> female!) employees who lived upon the sweated labour of members of your sex. We suggest that the finest propaganda you could ever do would be to make a living hell to such exploiters, until they gave their employees a comparatively living wage…allow us to say that we shall be glad to see your sex get the vote, for the sooner you get it the sooner will you cast it away and return to militant methods in your struggle for freedom!

In another article in the same issue of *The Syndicalist* Jack Radcliffe bemoaned that the 'magnificent heroism' of the suffrage campaign should be thrown away on 'so worthless a cause' since when women won the vote they would find it of no more use to them than it was 'to us men', accomplishing 'nothing' towards the overthrow of capitalism and the wage system.

Such a partly sympathetic, but also highly dismissive stance placed the syndicalists alongside every other labour and socialist organisation in refusing to make the enfranchisement of women, or women's rights in general, a campaigning priority. Combined with the antipathy towards the labour movement and strike action expressed by suffragette leaders, it contributed to driving a wedge between the two movements.

Broader Suffrage **potential vis-à-vis the labour movement**

Nonetheless there were simultaneously important elements of interconnection between the broader suffrage movement (embracing mainstream suffragists, radical suffragists, and minority suffragette elements) and the labour and socialist movement, which also need to be taken into account.

Radical suffragists

To begin with, we can consider the orientation and activity of those whom the historians Jill Liddington and Jill Norris (2000) termed 'radical suffragists' (although this was not used by the participants themselves at the time), who in the early 1900s, before the WSPU had been formed, made a particularly important contribution with respect to highlighting some of the potential for closer suffrage-labour links.

The issue of female suffrage was popularised on a mass scale when two young campaigners, Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper, believing that the franchise could not be won by the long-standing suffragist movement's traditional methods of meetings in middle class homes and discrete lobbying of individual MPs, began to consciously pursue a rather

different approach. This involved taking women's suffrage ideas into the cotton mill towns of Lancashire, where working class women were employed en masse and where 90,000 were organised in trade unions (five-sixths of all women trade unionists in Britain). In the process, they soon attracted the enthusiastic support of Selina Cooper (who had worked in a cotton mill in Barnoldswick, Lancashire and was a member of the Nelson Cotton Workers Union), Helen Silcock (President of the Wigan Weavers Union), Ada Nield Chew (who had started work as a low-paid tailoress in Crewe) and other leaders of local working women's' organisations with experience of factory work and/or of organising working women (Liddington and Norris, 2000, pp. 216-238).

After launching a petition on 1 May 1900 aimed specifically at women workers in Blackburn, there followed a year of sustained agitation around the Lancashire cotton towns, as the expanding movement took the issue of votes for women from door to door and to meetings at factory yards, street corners and town squares, whilst also putting suffrage motions through local trade union branches and organising through trades councils. In the process, they succeeded in persuading some 30,000 cotton workers to sign, and in 1901 a deputation of women mill workers took the petition to Westminster, with similar petitions subsequently circulating in the same way in Yorkshire, the Potteries, Leicestershire and Scotland (Liddington and Norris, 2000, pp.143-144).

As the campaign expanded Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper formed a new organisation of working women for the vote, with the rather unwieldy title of Lancashire and Cheshire Women Textile and Other Workers' Representation Committee. The Committee, and others that sprang up beside it, were the first organisations to explicitly fight for 'the enfranchisement of the women workers of this country' with the aim of sending 'their own nominee to the House of Commons' (*Manchester Guardian*, 23 October 1903). Collaborating closely with the growing labour movement, the radical suffragists used their influence to build a movement of working women who claimed not only the right to vote but also to take part in politics for themselves, although when Helen Silcock moved a resolution at the 1901 Trades Union Congress for 'womanhood suffrage' – to include all women over the age of 21 - that was warmly applauded, it was rejected in favour of an alternative resolution calling for universal suffrage.

Significantly, the radical suffragists disagreed fundamentally with the narrow focus on political equality with men to the exclusion of any other social issues that the newly-

formed WSPU was to advance. Instead they insisted the fight for the vote was part of a wider struggle in society, and campaigned not only to improve working women's wages and conditions, but also for improved education for working class girls and better facilities for working mothers and their children.

However, the radical suffragists' campaign waned, partly because the favourable regional and industrial bedrock on which their campaign had gained traction was not replicated elsewhere in the country, partly because of the evident failure of their petitioning crusade to bring immediate results, and partly because their campaign became overshadowed by the audacious and militant forms of direct action being waged by the WSPU, on the one hand, and the growth of the broader-based national suffrage organisation, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, on the other.

National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies

Running parallel with the suffragette's militant 'Deeds not Words' movement, the largest suffragist organisation, the NUWSS formed in 1897 by Millicent Fawcett, agitated like the suffragettes for women to be given the vote on the same limited property qualification basis as men. But significantly, they increasingly began to campaign in ways that more readily opened up the possibilities for links with working class communities. While initially defending the WSPU's militant tactics, by the end of 1909 the goodwill between the NUWSS and the WSPU had largely vanished, with the suffragists concerned to emphasise the power of peaceful protest and grass-roots canvassing and persuasion rather than in forcing the issues by violent acts.

The NUWSS published a weekly *Common Cause* newspaper and other literature, organised numerous huge meetings around the country (including mass rallies in London's Albert Hall), demonstrations in London, developed new tactics such as the 'Suffrage Caravans' which carried the suffrage message to isolated communities, and during the general election of 1910 launched a polling booth petition which collected signatures from over 300,000 male electors (Sloane, 2018). In the process, it won the support of some 'radical suffragist' figures that had previously forged the campaign to win improvements for working class women through both trade unionism and female suffrage, including Selina Cooper (NUWSS organiser 1906-14) and Ada Nield Chew (NUWSS organiser 1911-14), as well as members of the National Federation of Women Workers and ILP.

In July 1913 the NUWSS organised a six-week long 'Great Pilgrimage' involving over 6,000 women (and some men) marching from eight different locations across the country to London, with meetings held in every city, town and village they passed through, culminating in a 50,000-strong rally in Hyde Park. Hailed by many commentators as a 'respectable' alternative to the suffragettes the march revealed both the NUWSS's deep roots in the newly industrialising working class Northern towns and cities and the relative success of a conscious strategy of taking the argument for women's suffrage to ordinary people (Atkinson, 2018, p. 431). By 1913 it had 45,000 members and by 1914 600 branches (Robinson, 2018, p. 158). The extent of the NUWSS's support underlined the way in which in many respects they contributed as much as the suffragettes to making the fight for the vote a popular crusade, and became, unlike the much smaller WSPU, a mass membership organisation that was able to galvanise activists whose affiliations spanned participation in the trade union and labour movement.

Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Suffragettes

From within the suffragette movement itself there were also minority critical voices that raised in varying ways questions related to the need to extend the fight for the vote to broader social forces and issues. In 1907 prominent WSPU figures such as Charlotte Despard and Teresa Billington-Grieg, rejecting the perceived autocratic leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, split away with 70 other members to form a breakaway Women's Freedom League (WFL) that grew to over 4,000 members. The group argued in favour of linking the campaign for the vote to social reforms (like better pay, housing and education, along with school meals, nurseries and medical services), and developed tactics of non-violent civil disobedience and direct action, including the non-payment of taxes and boycott of the 1911 national census forms.[1] But it was Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of the WSPU who made the most important theoretical and practical contribution from within the suffragette movement to the view that suffrage was a class issue (Holmes, 2020).

Sylvia became increasingly at odds with the way the WSPU moved away from its labour movement roots, adopted a policy of political independence from the Labour Party,

[1] Two other leading WSPU figures, Emmeline and Fredrick Pethick-Lawrence, led another breakaway in 1912 after refusing to support the policy of introducing more extreme tactics focused on property destruction, and the shift towards refusing to support the Labour Party.

separated the feminist and socialist projects, increasingly focused on violent acts rather than campaigns to encourage mass struggles, and replaced democratic procedures with an autocratic form of leadership. She was inspired by studies she conducted of women workers' conditions, including the strike in August 1911 by 15,000 low-paid women employed in 20 different food-processing and other manufacturing factories in Bermondsey, south London, in protest at low wages and poor working conditions. Likewise she was enthused, during visits to America in 1911 and 1912, by meetings that were held with women strikers, suffragists and socialists (Connolly, 2019; Holmes, 2020). In the process, she began to the move in the direction of challenging both those in the labour and socialist movement who were attempting to ignore questions of women's oppression, and the WSPU leadership who insisted that social questions and class were irrelevant to the women's movement. The importance of *both* struggles and the devastating interaction of oppression and exploitation on working women's lives (with women experiencing greater exploitation at work precisely because of the discrimination they faced based on gender), increasingly became apparent (Connolly, 2013, pp. 32-33).

Sylvia persuaded WSPU activists to campaign with her in London's impoverished East End with a focus on working class women in a determined bid to link the struggle for women to have the vote to a larger struggle for immediate practical social issues – such as pay and working conditions, poverty and housing (Jackson and Taylor, 2014). It was by organising unstintingly on such a basis, with a huge series of open-air meetings and regular marches to Parliament, that by the summer of 1913 an East London Federation of the WSPU was established and a network of working class women was drawn into activity. These included wives of dockers, like Melvina Walker, who had been involved on the picket line in the 1912 London dock strike (Pankhurst, 1977, p. 524), Annie Lake, who was a member of the NFWW, and Elsie Taylor, a teenage factory worker and member of the Tailor and Garment Workers' Union who was chosen by her workmates as workplace rep (Connolly, 2013, p. 50).

For a variety of reasons, notably deeply-ingrained loyalty to her family and their organisation, Sylvia's opposition to the WSPU leadership tended to take on a very individualised and private form, with no explicit attempt to articulate an alternative strategy. Yet as George Dangerfield (1997) acknowledged, she discovered 'with unerring instinct, the sources of the country's most profound unrest' and 'carried the purple, white and green banner of militant suffrage into the great movement which…was then surging against the

bulwarks of organised Capital'. While not breaking away from the mother Union, she 'had a Federation of her own, down there in the grimy East End', such that 'her allegiance to the family cause so continually fought with her mounting enthusiasm for the workers around her' as her organisation in practice united the women's and labour movements (pp. 176-177).

It was Sylvia's participation on the platform of the *Daily Herald* rally in London's Albert Hall on Saturday 1 November 1913 in support of the imprisoned Jim Larkin and the Dublin locked out transport workers that proved a step too far for her mother and sister. This event, which 10,000 people attended and 20,000 were turned away, was one of the high points of the interconnection between the women's suffrage campaign and labour struggles. Speakers included Dora Montefiore, Charlotte Despard (WFL), Sylvia Pankhurst, Delia Larkin (secretary of the Irish Women Workers' Union), James Connolly (Irish Transport and General Workers' Union deputy general secretary), and Ben Tillett (leader of the 1911 and 1912 London transport strikes).

The symbolism of unity across the women's and labour movement was manifest in the way Sylvia Pankhurst received a tremendous reception when she spoke and was one of a number of speakers who linked Larkin's situation in Ireland to that of the suffragette prisoners being forcibly fed. The stewarding and financial collection at the rally was conducted by women 'many of whom wore Suffrage badges and sashes' (*Daily Herald*, 3 November 1913). As Dangerfield (1997) later reflected, it encapsulated the potential for links between the labour, socialist, suffrage and Irish independence movements:

> …on the speaker's platform sat, in serried ranks, the united grievances of England. For the first and last time Irish Nationalism, Militant Suffrage, and the Labour Unrest were met together…its strength was drawn from every factory, every workshop, mine, wharf and slum throughout the length and breadth of England (p. 178).

Sylvia was summoned to Paris, where Christabel had fled to exile in 1912 to avoid arrest and to continue to direct the suffragette movement whilst her mother was in prison, and reprimanded for building a campaign that centrally involved working class women. Christabel told her the East London Federation would be expelled from the national WSPU organisation and must take another name. After her return from Paris, Sylvia explained the difference between the ELF and the WSPU:

> We had more faith in what could be done by stirring up working women than was felt at [WSPU] headquarters, where they had most faith in what could be done for the vote by people of means and

> influence. In other words they said that they were working from the top down and we from the bottom up (Connolly, 2013, p. 59).

In January 1914 the expelled ELF added red to its suffragette banner colours, changed its name to the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS), and continued to build up its influence within working class communities. By the summer of 1914 there were five ELFS branches, and its *Woman's Dreadnought* newspaper, launched in March 1914 (with Sylvia as editor) had a weekly print run of 20,000 copies until the outbreak of war (Pankhurst, 1977, p. 525). The paper carried interviews with different groups of local women factory workers taking strike action and campaigned in their support, with ELFS members speaking at strikers meetings and strikers attending ELFS meetings (*Woman's Dreadnaught,* 25 April 1914; 23 May 1914; 18 July 1914). Amidst such activity the 'Women's Hall' ELFS headquarters was requisitioned for strike meetings and was 'appealed to for speakers and help in every sort of way' (Pankhurst, 1977, p. 543). Paradoxically it was the great reservoir of working class women's energy and combativity in the 'Great Unrest', that had been untapped nationally by the WSPU, which invigorated the suffrage struggle in the East End of London.

Labour movement **potential vis-à-vis the suffrage movement**

At this point it important to note there were also some positive dimensions displayed by elements of the labour, trade union and socialist movement in forging links with the women's suffrage movement.

Daily Herald

These links were prominently expressed via the pages of the *Daily Herald* newspaper which had emerged as a London print unions' strike news-sheet during a protracted dispute in 1911, eventually became a permanent daily in April 1912 with the support of leading figures, including Ben Tillett (dockers' union) and George Lansbury who became editor of the newspaper following a one-year stint by the syndicalist Charles Lapworth.

From the outset the new *Daily Herald* functioned politically independently and outside the control of the established leadership of the trade unions and Labour Party, as well as parties of the radical socialist left. The paper's editorial policy was keenly orientated on inviting dissident and militant opinion from a wide range of backgrounds in a forum-style format designed to debate the various issues raised (Holton, 1974, pp. 350-352). It became

‘known as the rebel paper and its supporters as rebels’ because, as George Lansbury (2009) put it, ‘it always found itself supporting workers who were out on strike…all men and women struggling to better their conditions instinctively turned to the *Daily Herald* for help during these first years’ (pp. 48-49). It both reported on and campaigned in support of numerous different strikes, notably the 1912 London transport strike and 1913 Dublin lockout, as well as strikes by women workers across the country over pay and conditions and union recognition. *Herald* circulation reached between 50-150,000 subscribers and possibly twice as many individual readers during the pre-1914 period, with a Herald League network of 50 local branches of supporters (embracing BSP, ILP, syndicalist, trade union, and suffrage activists) who collected money for strikers and the paper (Postgate, 1951).

Crucially the *Daily Herald* was the only national daily newspaper that fully supported the women’s suffrage campaign as well as the labour movement. It regularly reported on the subject and carried opinion pieces by both leading suffragist and ex-WSPU figures, including a ‘Suffrage Week’ series of articles spanning 12 pages between 2-10 February 1914. On occasion the whole of the front page of the paper displayed a drawing by the political cartoonist Will Dyson attacking the way the Liberal government treated the suffragettes, for example showing the Home Secretary force-feeding a prisoner (*Daily Herald*, 24 May 1913). And despite mainstream newspaper condemnation of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison’s protest – when she ran onto the racecourse during the Epson Derby in June 1913 and was knocked down and killed by the King’s horse - a Dyson cartoon was published in the *Herald* in solidarity.

The connection with sections of the suffrage movement was evidenced by the way in which Ann Cobden-Sanderson of the Women Freedom League became national treasurer of the Herald League, local WSPU speakers sometimes formed part of the platform at League meetings, and a few WSPU branches, especially in east London, also forged close links (*Daily Herald*, 16 December 1912) When London WSPU member Mrs Penn-Gaskell was interviewed in the paper she explained: ‘What had drawn her into the movement in support of the *Herald* was the splendid uncompromising spirit manifested towards the women’s cause primarily, and also for the workers’ movement generally’ (*Daily Herald*, 10 July 1913). Certainly the *Daily Herald*, a workers’ daily paper that embraced and supported the aspirations of a wide range of social and political causes, was another manifestation of the potential for cross-fertilisation and bridges between the different militant movements.

Domestic Workers' Union

Meanwhile, inspired by the strengths and characteristics of both the labour unrest and women's suffrage revolt, there was the emergence in March 1910 of the Domestic Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland (DWU) which aimed to organise the predominately young female domestic servant workforce that constituted between one third and one quarter of the female workforce at the time. The union, which was launched by Kathlyn Oliver, a London-based household worker in her early twenties, and sponsored by the National Federation of Women Workers and its paper *Woman Worker*, had about 2,000 members at some point up to 1914, with local branches also established in Glasgow, Manchester and Oxford (Schwartz, 2019, p. 51).

The DWU challenged many of the preconceived attitudes of both the labour and women's movements, whilst at the same time incorporating aspects of both. On the one hand, it was domestic servants' exploited class position which encouraged them to assert themselves as waged workers like any other, and to attempt to carve out a space within an industrially-orientated labour movement by demanding improved wages and conditions, shorter hours, and favourable government legislation. By attempting to reconfigure the mistress-maid relationship as a formal employment contract between employer and employee, the DWU did not shy away from the antagonism that existed between the two groups of women regardless of the sympathies or otherwise of individual mistresses, with the union ironically sometimes facing resistance from middle-class suffrage-supporting mistresses, who complained that the DWU was 'organised along class lines' (Schwartz, 2019, p. 193).

Yet at the same time DWU leaders were directly politicised by the suffrage movement and utilised feminist arguments to support their cause, with their union unlikely to have emerged without drawing strength from the mass women's movement that co-existed alongside the widespread labour militancy of the period. Certainly the DWU's main organisers were themselves active in the suffrage movement, convinced that the vote would improve the position of domestic workers just as it would transform the lives of all women. Thus Jessie Stephen was active in the Glasgow branch of the WSPU, as well as having close ties to the labour movement and a member of the ILP; Frances Dickenson was also in the 'militant wing' of the suffrage movement and appeared in 1913 on the Roll of Honour of Suffragette Prisoners; Kathryn Oliver supported universal suffrage for both men and women

and was linked with the People's Suffrage Federation; and Grace Neal (who took over the role of general secretary from Oliver in 1910) spent almost six months in Dublin during the 1913 lockout and assisted Dora Montefiore in her 'Save the Kiddies' scheme for Britain labour movement families to provide accommodation for the children of impoverished strikers' families (Hunt, 2013; Schwartz, 2014, pp. 181-2; 2019, p. 157; 165).

Women Workers' Strikes

Another important, if somewhat more diffuse and amorphous, link between the labour and suffrage movements was manifest in the wave of women workers' strikes that took place across the country in the years leading up to the First World War. As we have seen, in a context in which many unions either excluded or did not attempt to organise women workers, Mary Macarthur, general secretary of the National Federation of Women Workers, regarded a separate national women's general union as a necessary form of organisation through which women could gain a sense of solidarity and overcome their fragmented and isolated position (Hamilton, 1925). The NFWW's paper *The Woman Worker*, founded in 1908, had features on equal pay, maternity benefits, and the victimisation of women who did not comply with the sexual advances of foremen, as well as a series of articles on full adult suffrage (Boston, 1980; Hunt, 2013).

However Macarthur always looked to the day when women would be part of a large strong body representing *both* men and women. She abhorred 'any attempt to create sex antagonism between the men and women in industry' and maintained the single-sex NFWW was merely a temporary measure until such time as women were freely admitted to all trade unions (Hamilton, 1925, p 42). Therefore the NFWW co-operated as far as it could with established unions, such as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and gave its active support to the policy of joint organisation for men and women employed in the same trade or industry where that was possible (Hunt, 2012).

Integral to its relative success in growing from 2,000 to 20,000 members between 1906 and 1914, with over 70 branches on the eve of war (Drake, 1984), was the way it developed an evangelical style of trade unionism that made determined efforts to utilise militant strike action as the chief means of organising unorganised women workers (Rowbotham, 1999, p. 23). Indeed the union's record was largely one of supporting numerous women's strikes across the country, including chainmakers in Cradley Heath, metal workers in the Black Country, and curtain-net workers in Scotland (Barnsley, 2010;

Gordon, 1991; Hunt, 2014; Staples and Staples, 1990). Such strikes invariably followed a pattern whereby women workers would 'spontaneously' walk out on strike and then call on the NFWW to send an organiser, with Macarthur (or another organiser) helping to enrol workers to the union *en masse*, form a strike committee, launch a strike fund, and campaign for solidarity from other external sources, whilst at the same time negotiating with employers to win improvements in pay and conditions and recognition for the union (Boston, 1980; Hunt, 2011).

The mixed-sex Workers' Union - which had been formed in 1898 as a general trade union for unskilled and semi-skilled workers - was also active in supporting strikes in which women workers were involved, with Julia Varley, ex-NFWW organiser, becoming the union's chief women's organiser in 1912 (Hyman, 1971). And there were many other strikes of women workers across the country involving a variety of other unions, for example in the textile industry (Kenefick, 2012; Knox and Corr, 1996).

In many respects women strikers appear to have been influenced and emboldened both by the growing industrial unrest in which their (predominately) male counterparts in the larger trade unions were involved, as well as by the militant women's suffrage movement (Hunt, 2014, p. 49) in a context in which philosophies based on the notion of militant 'direct action' had become widespread (Cole, 1948, p. 321). It was often very young women and girls who were the driving force to the strikes in which they were involved, more likely to attempt a public display of their conditions of work and their grievances, possibly because of the legitimation given to their demands by the suffrage movement. Strikes often displayed a sudden welling-up of confidence among women workers, with a carnival atmosphere being generated very different to the more 'sober and serious' aspect of demonstrations of male workers, and which could involve the subversion of patriarchal authority through 'ridicule and sexual innuendo' (Fraser, 1999, p. 120; Gordon, 1991). In the process, women's strikes adopted 'suffrage tactics of propaganda and demonstration' (Thom, 1998, p. 103; 1986, p. 269) in order to give maximum impact to their actions, with the production of many leaflets, strike songs, banners, postcards, ribbons, and badges to publicise their struggles.

The overall weakening of traditional respect for 'law and order' and constitutional behaviour that characterised the militancy of both the suffrage movement and labour struggles of the period, was reflected in the way in which many women's strikes across the country were very assertive, and sometimes aggressive, with mass picketing aimed at

spreading the action to other groups of workers and preventing 'blacklegs' from breaking the strikes. For example, during a six-month strike at the Bliss Tweed Mill in Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire involving woollen-textile workers, non-strikers were pilloried, effigies of them paraded through the town, and during one of the nightly processions the strikers and their supporters targeted the houses of the mill's general manager, smashing their windows. A number of strike-related incidents – assaults on foremen, strike-breakers and police, and 'riotous' behaviour - went to court attracting large gatherings of supporters, with fines and imprisonment resulting (Richardson, 2008).

On occasion the link between the labour unrest and the suffrage revolt was relatively explicit. Thus during a strike at the Gundry's net and rope factory in Bridport, Dorset, in February 1912, women strikers marched through the streets of the town singing the suffragette anthem 'Shoulder to Shoulder' (Gaurita, 2015, p. 14). Likewise at a mass rally in Southwark Park for the Bermondsey women's strikers, platform speaker Charlotte Despard, the ex-WSPU leader who had devoted herself to the strike from the moment it started, was greeted with rapturous cries of 'Good Old Suffragette!' (*Votes for Women,* 25 August 1911). And the support shown by East London suffragettes for local workers' struggles was reciprocated in 1913 when dockers and gas workers' unions marched alongside them on demonstrations, and dockers acted as stewards and bodyguards, on one occasion in October 1913 fighting hand-to-hand with the police when Sylvia Pankhurst spoke in Bow (Atkinson, 2018, p. 442). Similarly the Sheffield organiser for the WSPU, Molly Morris, described how a number of working men who were active in the labour movement (including her future husband, engineering shop stewards' leader J.T. Murphy) used to frequent the WSPU's shop in the centre of the city, were interested in *Votes for Women* and 'could always be relied upon without asking to act as bodyguards whenever they knew some of us had decided to do some heckling at an opponent's meeting. It was great fun and very reassuring to be in such meetings when stewards would begin to make their way towards us, to see a dozen fellows, some of them six-footers…immediately surround us to ward off an attack' (Murphy, 1998, p. 26).

More often the link between the labour and women's movements was more tentative and diffuse, but real nonetheless, suggesting that notwithstanding the hostility of the WSPU leadership towards the 1910-14 strike wave strike movement, there was a good degree of respect and even support for the suffragette cause across a wide layer of labour, trade union and socialist movement activists. As Sylvia Pankhurst (1977, p. 367) claimed:

> The WSPU was regarded with admiration and friendship, not only by many on the Left Wing of the political Labour and Socialist movement, but also amongst the industrial rebels. Its editorial columns were scarcely read in such quarters, its speeches little noted, but its militant actions aroused the enthusiasm of those who were impatient of the slow pace of their own movements…Undoubtedly the example of Suffragette militancy…had a profound influence in accentuating militant tendencies in the Left Wing working class movement.

Some conclusions

In conclusion, Halévy (1934), and Dangerfield (1997) were undoubtedly accurate in highlighting the 'general spirit of revolt' that characterised the years leading up to the First World War, which was 'not only against the employers of all kinds…but also against leaders and …Parliamentary or any kind of constitutional and orderly action' (Askwith, 1974, p. 347). While Pelling (1968) and other historians were justified in pointing out that the three revolts of women, workers and Irish Nationalists largely remained separate from each other, they ignored or did not adequately take into account the nature and significance of the tentative linkages that were forged, at least between the suffrage and labour movements.

Clearly there were some important *objective* factors that mitigated against the development of closer links between the suffrage revolt and labour unrest, including the pronounced gender segregation of the labour market; the overwhelmingly male-dominated composition of trade unionism; the social class differences of the overall membership of respective labour and suffrage movements; and the overwhelming male composition of members and activists within the radical left organisations.

But such a backcloth was also compounded by crucial *subjective* factors, particularly the narrow and blinkered political orientations and tactics of many key figures within both the labour and socialist, and the suffrage movements. On the one hand, the sharp separation the radical left in its various forms made between political and industrial struggles proved to be a serious handicap, involving a preoccupation with abstract socialist propaganda and/or industrial struggle to the subordination, indeed outright dismissal, of broader political questions related to gender and suffrage. On the other hand, within the women's movement there was often an exclusive focus on women's suffrage as an end in itself without a link to broader social and political concerns. If the suffragettes' narrow franchise objective was plainly an unsatisfactory solution for the 40 per cent of disenfranchised men who would have

been left voteless, and failed to engage with or attempt to challenge the fundamental underlying class divisions on which women's discrimination was ultimately based, it was also 'sectarian folly' (Foot, p. 207) for the labour and socialist movement to have opposed the inspiring and militant suffragette movement's demand for 'Votes for Women', even if the effect of such franchise reform, had it been implemented, would have been limited.

Yet as has been explored, despite the apparent contending priorities of the labour and suffrage movements, there were some important areas of overlap, dialogue and activity that highlighted the potential that existed for cross-fertilisation between the movements and for the broader linking of class and gender issues, even if these were not always necessarily consciously recognised, pursued or developed.

Within the suffrage movement the actions of working class women were especially important, notably around the radical suffragist agitation in Lancashire, in the early years of the WSPU and later around Sylvia Pankhurst in the East End of London, as well as within the NUWSS. They played a key role in taking the argument for women's suffrage out to ordinary men and women, creating a tradition of struggle that linked female suffrage to trade union organisation. The growing number of women workers' strikes – themselves in part influenced by the suffrage movement - contributed to the building of a powerful militant workers' movement that held enormous strategic industrial power which potentially could have been directed at forcing through both economic and political changes of mutual benefit. Indeed arguably it was precisely within such strikes where women could be at their strongest and where they could win male workers to support and fight alongside them.

At the same time, some individual figures within both suffrage and labour movements grappled with the tactical pathway by which connections could be sought. For example, Sylvia Pankhurst (1977) recognised that the WSPU were tactically wrong to have had nothing positive to say about adult suffrage: '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' (p. 203). Perhaps if Sylvia's approach of uniting the women's suffrage campaign with the wider goals of the labour movement had been maintained, then suspicions on both sides might have been broken down and the two sides could have worked together more closely. But with the WSPU leadership separating its struggle from the wider battle for democratic representation, women's suffrage was presented

as an end in itself rather than a tactical stepping-stone towards adult suffrage, making cooperation between the women's and labour movements problematic.

Conversely, although articles on the suffrage question in the socialist weekly *Clarion* were critical of the WSPU and their 'limited Bill', editor Robert Blatchford argued for a position that might have gone a long way to healing the rift between labour and suffrage camps;. 'I am for universal male suffrage, but I am not against the limited Bill' (Foot, 2005, p. 208). Likewise one SLP supporter, Jane C. Matheson, who contributed repeatedly to the letters page of *The Socialist* during 1913, argued they should 'publicly support the aims of the Suffragettes – their just demand for the franchise – and show the connection between that and the revolutionary socialist aims of the SLP' (August 1913). On a more limited basis, George Lansbury sent a letter to encourage trade unionists, ILP members and others in the labour movement to protest against both the prosecutions of Tom Mann and his associates, as well as the treatment of the suffrage prisoners in Holloway Prison and elsewhere:

> We must agitate and educate our fellow workers so as to secure the removal from their present office of those men who are responsible for the iniquitous legal proceedings against them, whose only crime is that they are rightly struggling to be free. The Woman's Movement and the Labour Movement are two great forces which together will, I am sure, save mankind (*Daily Herald*, 29 April 1912).

But such viewpoints did not become the majority view of the SLP (or SDF/BSP or syndicalists), who instead remained completely aloof and dismissively critical from the side-lines.

By way of contrast with the left elsewhere internationally at the time, in both Germany and Russia Clara Zetkin and Alexander Kollontai respectively, whilst arguing it was necessary to oppose the 'bourgeois feminist' emphasis on women's suffrage, supported the demands of the middle-class women's movements, at the same time campaigning for socialist women to not confine themselves to the demand for the vote, but fight for the right to work, equal pay, paid maternity leave, free child-care facilities, and education for women, as part of a broader working class struggle against capitalism (Draper and Lipow, 1976, p. 201; Evans, 1987, p. 75; Kollontai, 1977, pp. 29-73).

Alas, in Britain the radical left was to be severely handicapped by its fairly mechanical political understanding of the link between oppression and exploitation; its abstention from practical intervention within the suffrage movement; and its lack of tactical flexibility in pursuing a united front approach that *both* supported the suffrage movement,

including the suffragettes, whilst *at the same time* retaining an independent class-based socialist politics that aimed to link the fight for suffrage to a broader economic and political struggle against capitalism by working class women *and* men. While the *Daily Herald's* role was highly significant in supporting labour and suffrage struggles and bringing together a wide range of activists, the paper lacked both the clear unified ideological and political stance to explicitly argue in favour of bringing together and generalising the demands of the two movements, as well as the well-developed organisational means by which any such outcome might have been facilitated. So ultimately, even though there were some very important interconnections, this did not fundamentally overcome the way in which the labour unrest and suffrage revolt generally remained on separate parallel tracks.

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