Working Class Women's Active Participation in the 1910-14 British Labour Revolt

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ABSTRACT

The 'Labour Revolt' that swept Britain in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War between 1910 and 1914 was one of the most sustained, dramatic and violent explosions of industrial militancy and associated social conflict the country has ever experienced. Yet remarkably, beyond some single-case studies, little detailed attention has been given within the fields of industrial relations and labour history to the active and prominent role played by women workers and non-working women to this strike-wave revolt and social confrontation. This paper attempts to fill the gap by drawing on both a range of secondary literature and new archival material to focus on 19 different strikes across a variety of industries in which women were directly involved as workers (in both non-unionised and unionised contexts), as well as 11 other strikes in which they were externally involved *en masse* in supporting predominately male strikers. In the process, the paper explores the causes, features, limits and potential, and broader consequences of this activity.

KEYWORDS

Women workers, Strikes, Trade unions

The so-called 'Labour Unrest' – or what more accurately should be termed 'Labour Revolt' - that swept Britain in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War between 1910 and 1914 was one of the most sustained, dramatic and violent explosions of industrial militancy and social conflict the country has ever experienced.[1] After some 20 years of relative quiescence in strike activity, there was a sudden and unanticipated eruption that spread rapidly on a scale well in excess of the 'New Unionism' upsurge of 1889-91.

The strike wave involved a number of large-scale disputes in strategically important sections of the economy involving miners, seamen, dockers and railway and building workers, as well as many other industries. It was a revolt dominated by unskilled and semi-skilled workers, encompassing both members of established and recognised trade unions, and also workers hitherto unorganised or unrecognised who became engaged in a fight to build collective organisation and for union recognition against the hostility of many employers. Action largely took place unofficially and independently of national trade-union leaderships whose unresponsiveness to workers' discontents, endeavours to channel grievances through established channels of collective bargaining and conciliation machinery, and advocacy of compromise and moderation was rejected by workers in favour of militant organisation and strike action from below.

But remarkably, beyond a few single-case studies,[2] little detailed attention has been given within the fields of industrial relations and labour history to the gender dimension, namely the prominent role played by women workers and non-working women in this strike wave revolt and social confrontation. Yet women workers were neither passive observers nor peripheral to the Labour Revolt, but played an active role in a number of stoppages, with young women and girls often the driving force. While the overall number of women workers on strike from 1910 to 1914 was only a fraction of the number of their male counterparts, they participated in numerous strikes both in women-only workplaces and in predominately male workplaces. Many strikes took place in workplaces where most, if not all, workers were not union members before the strike and there was no or little prior form of collective organisation, such that, apart from strike demands over pay and conditions, the issue of union recognition often became the

[1] DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14.* London: Pluto Press, 2023.

[2] For example, GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; KENEFICK, W. 'Locality, Regionality and Gender: Revisiting Industrial Protest Among Women Workers in Scotland 1910-13'. *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, Vol. 8, n.2, 2015, pp. 34-58.

focal point of the women's grievances. However, a number of important large strikes also took place in highly unionised environments, such as the Lancashire 1910 spinners' and 1911-12 weavers' lockouts, and the 1912 Dundee jute workers' strike. And in many male workers' strikes, in industries such as transport, mining and the railways, the wives of workers on strike often mobilised crucial financial support and actively participated in demonstrations, on picket lines and in violent confrontations with scabs, police and military.

This paper attempts to fill the research gap, based on an analysis of 19 different strikes across a varied set of industries in which women were directly involved as workers (in both non-unionised and unionised contexts), as well as 11 other strikes in which they were externally involved *en masse* in supporting predominately male strikers. It explores the causes, features, dynamics, limits and potential, and broader consequences of this activity. Drawing on a range of secondary industrial relations and labour history literature, and deploying new archival material (including papers from trade unions, the Home Office and the Board of Trade), and mainstream and radical left newspapers to foreground hitherto neglected aspects, it reveals fresh insights and provides a systematic analysis that draws out some historical and comparative implications.

Women and Trade Unionism

In the period before the First World War, many trade unions still displayed indifference or even opposition to the inclusion of women as members, with women's increasing participation in industries previously dominated by men often viewed as threatening the male breadwinner's 'family wage'.[3] Partly as a consequence of such negative predominant attitudes, more than 90 percent of all trade unionists were men in 1914, even though there was a significant increase in union membership among women in the period 1910 to 1914.

Some of the general labour unions that emerged from the 'New Unionism' strike upsurge (such as the Matchmakers' Union and Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union) welcomed the recruitment and organisation of women workers, and there was a notable concentration of women union members in the cotton, jute and boot and shoe industries. A Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) fostered the organisation of women in the same unions as men in predominately female trades. Yet by its very nature, the WTUL excluded the many thousands

[3] BOSTON, S. *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement.* London: Davis-Poynter, 1980; LEWENHAK, S. *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement.* London: Ernest Benn, 1977; SOLDON, N.C. *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976.* Bristol: Gill and Macmillan, 1978.

of women in male-dominated industries where they were excluded from existing unions, as well as in trades where there was no union. Moreover, it was committed to social peace in industry, as opposed to 'tirades against the bourgeoisie' which were regarded as 'unreal'.[4]

It was to address this problem that the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) – an all-female organisation – was founded by Mary Macarthur in 1906. It organised women working both in predominately male-dominated industries where they were refused admission to the existing unions, as well as women working in unorganised trades where there was no union.[5] Macarthur regarded a separate national women's federation as a necessary temporary form of organisation through which women could gain a sense of solidarity and overcome their fragmented and isolated position.[6] But the NFWW co-operated as far as it could with established unions 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.[7] Integral to its relative success in growing from 2000 to 20 000 members between 1906 and 1914, with more than 70 branches on the eve of war,[8] was the way it developed an evangelical style of trade unionism that made determined efforts to use militant strike action as the chief means of organising unorganised women workers.[9] Indeed, the union's record was largely one of supporting numerous women's strikes across the country.

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, a former NFWW organiser, becoming the union's chief women's organiser in 1912.[10] There were many other strikes of women workers across the country, involving a variety of other unions, such as in the textile industry.[11] And another important development was the formation in September 1911 of the Irish Women's Workers'

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[4] GOLDMAN, H. *Emma Patterson: She Led Women into a Man's World*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974.
[5] DRAKE, B. *Women in Trade Unions.* London: Virago, 1984; HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921.* Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; HUNT, C. *Righting the Wrong: Mary Macarthur 1880-1921: The Working Woman's Champion.* Birmingham: West Midlands History. 2019.
[6] HAMILTON, M.A. *Mary Macarthur: A Biographical Sketch.* London: Leonard Parsons, 1925, p. 42.
[7] HUNT C. 'Sex Versus Class in Two British Trade Unions in the Early Twentieth Century'. *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 24, n.1, 2012, pp. 86-110.
[8] DRAKE, B. *Women in Trade Unions.* Op. Cit.
[9] ROWBOTHAM, S. *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the USA.* London: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 23.
[10] HYMAN, R. *The Workers' Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
[11] KENEFICK, W. 'An Effervescence of Youth: Female Textile Workers' Strike Activity in Dundee, 1911-1912'. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*. N. 33, 2012, pp. 189-221.
(2012); KNOX, W. and CORR, H. '"Striking women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914'. In W. KENEFICK and MCIVOR, A. (eds.) *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910-1914?: Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland* (pp. 107-128). Edinburgh: John Donald, 1996.

Union (IWWU), with membership open to all women regardless of their industry or job, albeit that, in many respects, it was closer to a women's section of Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union than an independent union, with Delia Larkin (Jim's sister) becoming the union's general secretary.[12] But, as already mentioned, many women's strikes took place where there was no or little prior union organisation.

Rank-and File Action and Official Union Leadership

Generally, during the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, many strikes developed with a rank-and-file/union officialdom dynamic at their heart, in which both rank-and-file initiative *and* official action was sometimes crucial, even though overall the restraining influence of national union leaders often undermined rank-and-file potential.

On the one hand, many full-time union officials were emphatically opposed to strike action advocated by militants within their ranks and did what they could to stymie rank-and-file initiatives and unofficial action, even though they were not always successful in this endeavour. They often viewed spasmodic unofficial stoppages as undesirable, undermining their credibility with employers with whom they had struck agreements on behalf of their members. On the other hand, subject to significant pressures from their rank-and-file union members, with the perceived failure to deliver some improvements in pay and conditions raising the danger of workers bypassing them by acting unofficially, even some moderate union officials occasionally felt obliged to identify with, give official support to, and even call strike action themselves, although they often viewed this as the means to assert officially-sanctioned control that could restrain the struggle. But in addition to those individual local or district-based full-time union officials, who, because they were closer to rank-and-file members, tended to be more responsive to militant pressure from below, there were also a layer of officials who could more accurately be described as union 'organisers', including women such as MacArthur, Varley and others.

Significantly, many women's strikes followed a pattern whereby women workers would 'spontaneously' walk out on strike and then call on the NFWW, the Workers' Union WU or other unions to send an organiser. In the case of Macarthur and Varley, they often helped to

[12] KING, C. 'A Separate Economic Class?', Book Review: 'These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women's Workers' Union'. *Saothar*. N. 14, 1989, pp. 67-70; MORIATORY, T. 'Larkin and the Women's Movement', in (ed.) Nevin, D. *Jim Larkin: Lion of the Fold*, Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 2006, pp. 95-96; JONES, M. *These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women Workers' Union*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988.

enrol workers in 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 helping to negotiate with employers to win improvements in pay and conditions and union recognition.

For example, when 15 000 unskilled women workers in 20 different food processing, glue and box-making factories in Bermondsey, London, walked out in 1911, they immediately turned to the NFWW for assistance and both Mary Macarthur and Marion Phillips of the Women's Labour League threw themselves into setting up headquarters in the local Labour Institute and ILP base, helping to co-ordinate setting up strike committees, organising daily strike meetings and conducting negotiations with a list of wage demands.[13] Similarly, during the wave of strikes by West Midlands metal workers in 1913, even though local WU officials such as John Beard and Varley had often not initiated strikes, they quickly supported them, articulated workers' demands, and helped win solidarity, in the process attracting many new union members. As the ASE's Midlands Organising District Secretary wryly observed: 'The Workers' Union is not so much directing the strikers as following them, and is making members by the thousand'.[14]

But although strike action often appeared 'spontaneous and impulsive', the influence of external (often female) full-time union organisers could also be a contributing factor. For example, before the 1910 Neilston textile workers' strike in East Renfrewshire, NFWW organisers Esther Dick and Kate McLean and leading activists from the Glasgow Trades Council had been instrumental in establishing a branch of the union in the factory. Once the dispute had begun, the Federation drafted in Dick to assist the women in negotiations with management, and within days the majority of workers in the mills were NFWW members.[15]

Youthful Assertiveness

During the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, an important factor in the assertion of independent working-class power was the role assumed by young workers (both men and women) who were largely free from the defensive mentality associated with earlier forms of official trade unionism conditioned since the defeat of New Unionism in the 1890s and early 1900s, and who

[13] DE LA MARE, U. 'Necessity and Rage: The Factory Women's Strikes in Bermondsey, 1911'. *History Workshop Journal*. Vol. 61, n.1, 2008, p. 73.
[14] ASE *Monthly Journal and Report*, June 1913; CARR, F.W. (1978) 'Engineering Workers and the Rise of Labour in Coventry 1914-1939', PhD, University of Warwick, September 1978, pp. 34-35.
[15] GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 136; KNOX, W. and CORR, H. '"Striking Women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914'. Op. Cit, pp. 107-128.

eagerly sought new forms of militant organisation that would allow a direct struggle against the employers and the state. Indeed, it was often very young women and girls who were the driving force of the strikes in which they were involved. For example, a high proportion of the 1700 women involved in the 1910 Neilston textile workers' strike were aged between 15 and 18 years old, with many playing a leading role in its organisation.[16] Likewise the militant women strikers in the Jacob's biscuit factory in Dublin who had welcomed the IWWU so enthusiastically in 1911 were, in the main, very young, often in the early teens, and strong in spirit.[17]

As with male workers, women's strikes were invariably assertive, with 'direct action' – the notion that no one could help the workers unless they helped themselves, by taking into their own hands the task of organising against employers - becoming the gospel of the day. Belligerent working-class self-confidence and the vigorous and self-emancipatory nature of much strike activity with its underlying demand for dignity, self-respect and control over working lives, was a feature of this so-called 'effervescence of youth'.[18]

But in the process, women often brought what Eleanor Gordon termed 'specifically female characteristics' to their workplace resistance – spontaneity, lack of restraint, boisterousness – which, she argued, differentiated women's militancy from more formal male trade unionism. Thus, strikes often displayed a 'sudden welling-up of confidence among women workers', with a carnival-type atmosphere with elements of street theatre being generated which was 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'.[19]

Women strikers participated in huge numbers on local solidarity demonstrations, often marching in their own contingents – during the 1910 Neilston textile workers' strike, there was a 5000-strong march of strikers and their supporters to the home of the manager of the mills at Barrhead, some seven miles away, with pipers, singing and banner-waving, and the carrying effigies of the manager.[20] During the 1911 Vale of Leven United Turkey Red women's strike,

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[16] GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Op. Cit, p. 136.
[17] MORIATORY, T. 'Larkin and the Women's Movement'. Op. Cit; JONES, M. *These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women Workers' Union.* Op. Cit.
[18] ASKWITH, Lord. *Industrial Problems and Disputes*. Brighton: Harvester Press. [1920] 1974.
[19] GORDON, E. 'Women, Work and Collective Action: Dundee Jute Workers 1870-1906'. *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 21, n.1, 1987, pp. 42-44; GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Op. Cit; HAMISH FRASER, W. *A History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1998*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 120.
[20] GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Op. Cit, p. 244; KNOX. W. and CORR, H. '"Striking women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914'. Op. Cit, pp. 120-121.

the NFWW's Scottish organiser, Kate McLean, succeeded in organising mass meetings and building branches of the union with an estimated membership of 2000. On the first day, the strikers and their supporters – numbering 7000 at the gates – brought the works to a 'virtual standstill'. Workers formed an impromptu band, behind which both men and women marched, with women pickets lining the streets to jeer strike-breakers with banners declaring 'White Slaves, Vale of Leven, No Surrender'. A carnival atmosphere within the Vale was evidenced when a march of thousands was escorted by four bands displayed two effigies, one representing the director of the company and the other the firemen-clerks.[21]

With 20 separate women's strikes joining together in Bermondsey in August 1911, the *Daily Chronicle* reported on a demonstration:

> The women seemed to be in the highest spirits. They went laughing and singing through Bermondsey, shouting, 'Are we downhearted?' and answering the question by a shrill chorus of 'No!'. It was noticeable that many of them had put on their 'Sunday Best'. In spite of the great heat, hundreds of them wore fur boas and tippets – the sign of self-respect.[22]

The journalist and historian George Dangerfield considered it was as though 'their strike [was] some holiday of the soul, long overdue'.[23]

A predominately women's strike in 1914 by more than 1000 workers at Morton's, a food preparation factory in Millwall, east London, involved a march around the area in which the *Daily Mail* published a photograph under the headline 'Tango Dancing Girl Strikers', with another march to Trafalgar Square accompanied by a band and piper and NFWW banner, and joined at Blackfriars by women workers from Camberwell who were also on strike.[24]

At the same time, women strikers not only organised picketing outside their workplaces, but also 'flying' picketing, aiming to spread the action to other groups of workers. For example, in July 1914, Mary Bamber, the Liverpool local organiser for the Amalgamated Warehouse and General Workers Union, led a strike of 6000 laundresses, with large mass meetings, pickets, visits to individual scabs' homes to persuade them to join the strike, and a seven-mile march of 1200 women to form a mass picket to close down a laundry in Formby, in the north end of Liverpool.[25]

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[21] *Glasgow Herald*, 14 December 1911.
[22] *Daily Chronicle*, 15 August 1911.
[23] DANGERFIELD, G. *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914.* London: Serif, [1935] 1997, p. 216.
[24] *Daily Herald,* 25 March 1914; JACKSON, S. and TAYLOR, R. *East London Suffragettes.* Stroud: The History Press, 2014, pp. 138-139.
[25] REES, J. 'Mary Bamber, 1874-1938'. *North West Labour History*, N. 42, 2017, p. 44.

During the 1911 Cardiff transport strike, strikes extended with a number of 'marching gangs' of pickets touring the docks and surrounding streets to spread the strike against the advice of their union officials to many other of Cardiff's myriad of dockside workplaces. These included flour mill workers, manufacturing and engineering workers, laundry assistants and wire-rope and brattice cloth workers. The police complained about intimidation 'by bodies of men and women going from place to place with a view to inducing those inclined to remain at work to join their ranks'. When women factory and workshop workers joined the strike wave, the *South Wales Daily News* reported 'the feminine strike was not without its exciting incidents', as women and girls on the potato wharves forced entry into other premises, including Hancock's brewery, where they pitched casks of beer into the docks, and Frank's sweet factory, where it was alleged that 'several employees complained that they were literally dragged out'.[26]

Women's strikers were also involved in generating financial support and arranging for the collection and distribution of food. For example, in the 1910 Cradley Heath chain makers' strike, the women strikers organised collections outside churches, chapels, football grounds, factories and trade-union meetings, with more than 200 trade union bodies donating to the strike fund by the second week of the strike. So successful were attempts to raise support that a remarkable £4,000 [£482,000 today] was received by the end of the dispute, thereby making it possible to provide all the women with strike pay of five shillings a week, as well as handouts of food and a milk ration for those with children.[27]

During the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes, because most strikers entered the dispute as non-unionists, they were ineligible for strike pay. So, a massive community effort provided relief, with charity shows at theatres, tradesmen donating food and the Town Council of Smethwick feeding children at school. Frequent meetings and demonstrations were held to maintain morale.[28] And during the 1913 Dublin workers' lockout, when Jim Larkin went to seek support from British workers, Delia effectively took charge of the entire undertaking to feed the ITGWU's and IWWU's members and their dependants throughout the six-month dispute. A women's committee of union volunteers, strikers' relatives and the circle of political

[26] *South Wales Daily News*, 22 July 1911.
[27] BARNSLEY, T. *Breaking their Chains: Mary Macarthur and the Chainmakers' Strike of 1910.* London: Bookmarks, 2010, pp. 43-4; SLOAN, N. *The Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History.* I.B. Tauris, 2018, p. 169.
[28] STAPLES, C.L. and STAPLES, W.G. '"A Strike of Girls": Gender and Class in the British Metal Trades, 1913'. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol, 12, n.2, 1990, p. 166.

women in Dublin provided daily breakfasts for 3000 children, lunches for nursing mothers and the distribution of clothing.[29]

Meanwhile invariably women involved in disputes developed their own organic rank-and-file strike leaders, with representation on their own strike committees or joint male and female strike committees (as during the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes), as well as part of the negotiating teams with management (as in the 1911 Clydebank strike at the huge American-owned Singer sewing machine plant).

Argument of Force

Throughout the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, employers attempted to break strikes by encouraging so-called 'blackleg' [sic] labour,[30] which invariably led to outbursts of violent confrontation. In the process, women strikers (like their male counterparts) were often aggressive, with many actively involved in mass picketing aiming to try to prevent scabs from breaking strikes, including physical attacks on scabs, albeit that this often-received backing from other workers and local supporters. For example, when six Kilbirnie Curtain net strikers were tried in Kilmarnock for intimidation of 'blacklegs', they were accompanied by 'about sixty sympathisers, including pipers and night-shift workers from Glengarock'. Four of the women were found guilty and fined, and on their return to Kilbirnie, the whole town turned out to welcome them.[31]

During the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes, a large crowd of strikers at Fellows Ltd of Bilston tried to storm the works' gates and stoned the 150 policemen posted there, successfully preventing scabs from working in the strikebound factory. Five young women strikers, who were imprisoned for their alleged intimidation of 'blacklegs', were met on their release by a demonstration under the auspices of the WU, with thousands of people lining the route and giving loud cheers for the girls; a large meeting was held afterwards addressed by Varley and local union reps.[32]

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[29] MORIATORY, T. 'Delia Larkin: Relative Obscurity'. Op. Cit, p. 433.
[30] The term 'blackleg', although used colloquially without any direct racist overtones by strike participants, has been placed in inverted commas to highlight that it is not the author's term of choice. DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' *Labor History*. Vol. 61, N.5/6, 2020; DARLINGTON, R. 'Strikers Versus Scabs: Violence in the 1910-14 British Labour Revolt'. *Labor History.* Vol. 63, n.3, 2022.
[31] GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914.* Op. Cit, p. 249.
[32] *Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911.

During the six-month strike in 1913 and 1914 at the Bliss Tweed Mill in Chipping Norton – a small market town in Oxfordshire – that involved 237 woollen-textile workers (125 women and 112 men), there were a number of incidents of assault on 'blacklegs' and police, with strikers going to court and being fined or imprisoned. Annie Cooper, who had worked at the mills for 26 years, was found guilty of assaulting a strike-breaker and sentenced to 14 days in prison after refusing to pay the fine. On her release, Cooper was met by 1000 jubilant supporters, presented with a silver teapot inscribed to commemorate the occasion from the WU's Julia Varley, paraded through the streets in a wagon pulled by the strikers and accompanied by a brass band, and greeted by a packed meeting at the Town Hall.[33]

Community Solidarity

Meanwhile, an important feature of many male workers' strikes during the period 1910 to 1914 was the culture of community solidarity that was generated, encompassing not only other local workers but also the relatives, friends and sympathisers of those directly involved in strikes – notably many strikers' wives and female siblings. While this often involved helping to raise financial support and the day-to-day provision of food and other basic necessities to sustain strikes, it also meant many women in the community were mobilised to support male strikers' use of mass picketing.

For example, during the 1911 Horwich locomotive workers' strike, which was entirely male, women sometimes took a prominent part in picketing and demonstrations. They also attended the mass meetings, sometimes in large numbers, and even attempted to vote, with one speaker at a mass meeting feeling it necessary to call on the women 'to be ladylike'. A riot occurred in September when a large crowd, including several hundred strikers' wives and sisters, assembled at the work's main entrance to await the arrival of 'blacklegs', foremen and company officials, with egg-throwing and fights breaking out with police. Police reinforcements were rushed in, and the next day a crowd threw bottles, potatoes and other missiles and smashed the windows of the manager's house, although the Strike Committee deplored the violence and issued a statement dissociating themselves from it.[34]

[33] RICHARDSON, M. '"Murphyism in Oxfordshire" – The Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913-14: Causes, Conduct and Consequences'. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*. N. 25/26, 2008, pp. 96-7; RICHARDSON, M. *Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913-14*. Bristol: Bristol Radical History Group, 2013, p. 23.
[34] WHITEHEAD, J. '1911: The Great Unrest Comes to Horwich'. *North West Labour History Society*. N. 9, 1983, p. 21; 18-19.

The deployment of extensive ranks of police officers, and sometimes even troops, to defend 'blacklegs' and undermine strikes again and again, merely served to intensify women's solidarity mobilisations, sometimes producing large-scale community confrontations. For example, during the 1910-11 South Wales miners' strike, crowds of women were involved in haranguing, ostracising, and sometimes attacking scabs in the streets or at their homes and frog-marching them back home, throwing stones to smash the windows of their empty homes.[35] They were also actively involved in mass picketing outside the Llwynypia pit, with a demonstration of between 7000 and 9000 miners and their supporters, culminating in the legendary riot in the nearby town centre of Tonypandy, which damaged 63 shops. Shop fronts were smashed and goods of every description, including drapery, millinery and grocery provisions, littered the streets, with many women looters carrying away rolls of cloth, hats, umbrellas, bundles of clothing and even shop fittings.[36]

Later in November 1910 there was the 'battle of Penygraig', a village near Tonypandy, when striking miners ran around a warren of terraced streets attacking the police from the rear and the sides, with many women joining the strikers and, from bedroom windows, showering buckets of hot water and household utensils onto the police. Further clashes took place, including one in July 1911 at the Ely pit, when a 3000-plus-strong crowd of miners threw stones at police escorting a 'blackleg' in to work, from positions on the mountainside above the pit. They were supported by women who collected loose stones in buckets and their aprons to provide relays of ammunition. Police baton-charges failed to dislodge the pickets until 80 soldiers arrived from the Somerset Light Infantry, armed with fixed bayonets and ball cartridge.[37]

During the 1911 national transport strikes, there were also repeated confrontations in which women were involved. In Hull, following rioting by about 2000 dockers, involving police baton-charges and strikers' launching fusillades of stones and bricks, a town councillor who had been in Paris during the 1871 Commune said he 'had never seen anything like this, and…not known that there were such people in Hull – women with hair streaming and half nude, reeling through the streets smashing and destroying'.[38]

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[35] EVANS, D. *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911.* London: Educational Publishing, 1911, p. 84; *The Times*, 8 November 1910.
[36] *Daily Mirro*r, 10 November 1910; EVANS, G. and MADDOX, D. *The Tonypandy Riots 1910-1911.* Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2010, p. 76.
[37] EVANS, D. *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911.* Op. Cit. pp. 90-95; 111.
[38] ASKWITH, Lord, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*. Op. Cit, p. 150.

In Manchester there was also mass picketing against scabs, and repeated confrontations and mini-riots between up to 3000 strikers and the police, with pickets holding up all produce for the wholesale market aided by large crowds of women who pelted officers with peas and raspberries, to which police responded with baton-charges.[39] As elsewhere, an important feature of the strike dynamic was the support provided by the wives of seamen and dockers, who regularly addressed mass meetings, with over 100 assembling at the docks gates on one occasion to encourage strikers to remain firm. On Friday 7 July, a demonstration of about 2000 women 'in their tattered shawls and gowns', many of them carrying children in their arms, marched from Salford to Manchester city centre with banners carrying slogans such as 'Our Poverty is Your Danger – Stand by Us!'.[40]

During the 1911 Liverpool transport strike, following a police attack on a rally in St George's Square ('Bloody Sunday'), there was rioting on the streets for the following two days, including an attack by 3000 on a convoy of five prison waggons transporting convicted Bloody Sunday prisoners to Walton Gaol under the protection of mounted police and soldiers, resulting in two strikers being shot dead. Although the strike committee disclaimed any responsibility for the protest, arguing that 'none of the men who took part in the attack on the van were strikers', the records of those hospitalised and arrested reveals it involved not only dockers and carters, but also local women and children.[41]

During the 1912 national miners' strike, in a few areas where attempts were made to re-open pits with 'blackleg' labour backed up by police or military, there were isolated incidents of 'disorder'. For example, in March, rioting by crowds of up to 6000 pickets and their supporters, including hundreds of women carrying their children, took place for several hours in the Cannock Chase coalfield in Staffordshire, involving 'threats of vengeance' against men who were working. Stones and other missiles were thrown, buildings attacked, and windows and plant damaged, leading to police reinforcements being hastily summoned from various

[39] *Daily Mirror*, 5 July 1911.
[40] *Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1911; ROBERTS, R. *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century.* London: Penguin, 1990, pp. 94-95; FROW, E. and FROW, R. *The General Strike in Salford in 1911.* Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 1990, p.15; IVES, M. 'Understanding the Workers' Revolt of 1911 with Special Reference to the Transport Strikes in Manchester and Salford'. BA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1986, p. 33.
[41] HOLTON, B. *British Syndicalism 1900-1914.* London: Pluto Press, 1976, pp. 101-102; DAVIES, S. and NOON, R. 'The Rank-and-File in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike'. *Labour History Review*, Vol. 79, n.1, 2014, pp. 69-72.

districts, and repeated baton-charges to disperse the crowd. Five hundred troops from the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment arrived shortly afterwards.[42]

And, during the 1913 Cornish clay workers' strike, strikers sent pickets from pit to pit in mid-Cornwall, winning support, and Julia Varley from the WU was sent to organise the miners' wives and families of the strikers, holding large demonstrations. When a demonstration of 300 to 400 strikers near Bugle, which included two 'waggonettes' full of women organised by Julia Varley, was baton-charged by the police,[43] the attack attracted the attention of the national press and a resolution from the annual TUC Congress protesting against the violent conduct of the police imported into Cornwall.[44]

Strikes and Union Membership Growth

During the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, the realisation that militant strike action could win major concessions from employers had a 'demonstration effect' that encouraged strikes as a key weapon across many industries and led, despite a dramatic reversal of fortune in some individual battles, to a spectacular growth in the total power of organised labour:

> …unions became the beneficiaries of a virtuous circle of effectiveness and membership. As the scale of strike activity increased, so did the win rate, and as the win rate increased, bargaining coverage rose, more workers perceived unions to be effective and joined them, which in turn enabled more strikes to be called...and so on.[45]

Previously unorganised workers flocked into unions, with the general unions which catered for less-skilled workers growing much faster than the movement as a whole. In the process, trade-union organisation in Britain was completely transformed, surpassing (in absolute if not relative terms) the achievements of the New Unionism strike wave, with a 62 percent increase in union membership from 2.5 million in 1910 to 4.1 million by 1914, and an accompanying increase in union density (the proportion of workers in the labour force who were union members) from 14.6 percent to 23 percent.

What sharply differentiated this strike wave and accompanying union growth from its late nineteenth predecessor was both its generalised nature and its substantial basis in

[42] 'Disturbances at Cannock Chase'. 27-28 March 1912, National Archives, HO 45/10675/218.781/130; *Daily Mirror*, 28 and 29 March 1912; *The Times*, 28 March 1912.
[43] COSTLEY, N. *The 1913 China Clay Strike*. South West Trades Union Congress, 2013, p. 37.
[44] Report of Proceedings. Forty-Sixth Annual Trades Union Congress, Manchester, 1-6 September 1913, pp. 237-239.
[45] KELLY, J. *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*. London: Verso, 1988, p. 101.

manufacturing factory-based industries that had been only marginally affected by the earlier upsurge, including an expansion of union organisation among women workers by 54 percent, thereby creating a credible foundation for the spread of female trade unionism beyond its previous textile industry enclave.

For example, after ten weeks on strike, the Cradley Heath chain makers' dispute ended victoriously, with NFWW membership growing to 1700 from 400 before the strike. The ten-day Bermondsey factory strikes resulted in wage rises ranging from one to four shillings a week and improved working conditions, along with union recognition granted by most of the 20 employers; the NFWW recruited 2000 members. The 1913 Kilbirnie curtain net workers' strike was resolved after 21 weeks, with the women obtaining a pay increase which, although less than the initial demand, was regarded as a victory, as well as union recognition, with the NFWW enrolling almost 1000 new members. The 1914 Morton's strike in east London lasted 12 days before management, having been overwhelmed by the strikers' public support and embarrassed by the media coverage, agreed to the strikers' demands, including a general wage increase of between ten and 25 percent; 960 women were enrolled by the Federation.

Suffrage Movement Influence

Significantly many women strikers appear to have been influenced and emboldened not only by the growing industrial militancy in which their predominately male counterparts in the trade unions were involved, but also by the militant women's suffrage movement of the period.[46] Throughout the period of the Labour Revolt, the simultaneous campaign to try to bend parliament to its will and grant women the vote mounted by the suffragettes (the Women's Social and Political Union, WSPU) and suffragists (including the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) challenged the legitimacy of existing forms of parliamentary democracy.

Of particular relevance was the way the WSPU suffragette leaders escalated their militant campaign of civil disobedience by appealing for a new burst of militancy, with Emmeline Pankhurst declaring: 'The argument of the broken pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics'.[47] It resulted in coordinated mass breaking of windows of famous department stores in London's West End, physical assaults on government ministers (including the prime

[46] HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921.* Op. Cit, p. 49; DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit; DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14.* Op. Cit.
[47] *Votes for Women*, 23 February 1912.

minister, home secretary and chancellor), blowing up letter boxes, setting fire to well-known buildings and country houses, and slashing art works in galleries.[48] As a result of this escalating militant campaign, the suffragettes were to be at the receiving end of extreme repression and violence from the government and police, with more than 1000 activists across the country arrested and imprisoned for their actions, and many subjected to systematic force-feeding torture.

In the process, 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[49] was reflected in the way in which, as we have seen, many women's strikes across the country were very assertive, and often aggressive, in a context in which philosophies based on the notion of militant 'direct action' became widespread.[50] In the process, they sometimes adopted 'suffrage tactics of propaganda and demonstration' 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.[51]

On occasion, the link between the Labour Revolt and the suffrage revolt was relatively explicit. For example, during a strike at the Gundry's net and rope factory in Bridport, Dorset, in February 1912, it was reported that women strikers marched through the streets of the town singing the suffragette anthem 'Shoulder to Shoulder'.[52] 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!'.[53]

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[48] RIDDELL, F. 'Can We Call the Suffragettes Terrorists? Absolutely'. *BBC History Magazine*, May 2018, pp. 66-67; ATKINSON, D. *Rise up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

[49] Further adding to the extra-parliamentary and unlawful context was 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. See HALÉVY, E. *A History of the English People, Vol. 2: 1905-1915*. London: Ernest Benn, [1934] 1961.

[50] HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921.* Op. Cit, p. 49; COLE, G.D.H. *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789-1947.* London: Allen and Unwin, 1948, p. 321; DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit.

[51] THOM, D. *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War 1*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 103; THOM, D. 'The Bundle of Sticks: Women, Trade Unionists and Collective Organisation'. In JOHN, A.V (Ed.), *Equal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (pp. 261-289). Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p. 269.

[52] *Bridport News*, 16 February 1912.

[53] *Votes for Women*, 25 August 1911.

And the support shown by Sylvia Pankhurst and her East London Federation of the WSPU for local workers' struggles was reciprocated in 1913 when dockers' and gas workers' unions marched alongside them on suffrage demonstrations, and dockers acted as stewards and bodyguards – on one occasion in October 1913 fighting hand-to-hand with the police when Pankhurst spoke in Bow.[54] 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.'[55]

There were some important areas of dialogue, overlap and activity that highlighted the potential for cross-fertilisation between the suffrage and labour movements and for the broader linking of class and gender issues, even if these were not always necessarily consciously recognised, pursued or developed. For example, Sylvia Pankhurst and her East London Federation played a key role in creating a tradition of struggle that linked female suffrage to trade union organisation to improve working women's wages and conditions as part of a wider struggle over poverty, housing and other social issues.[56] As Dangerfield noted, 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'.[57] It was precisely such activity that led to Sylvia and her federation being expelled from the WSPU by her mother and sister (Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst) who had moved away from its labour-movement roots and separated feminist and socialist projects.[58] Nonetheless, the expelled group, adding red to its suffragette colours and changing its name to the East London Federation of Suffragettes, continued to build up its influence within working class communities; by the summer of 1914 it had five branches and its newly-launched *Woman's Dreadnought* newspaper had a readership of up to 10 000.[59]

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[54] ATKINSON D. *Rise up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes*. Op. Cit, p. 442.
[55] MURPHY, M. *Suffragette and Socialist.* Institute for Social Research, University of Salford, 1998, p. 26.
[56] CONNELLY, K. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist and Scourge of Empire.* London: Pluto Press, 2013; JACKSON, S. and TAYLOR, R. *East London Suffragettes*. Op. Cit; HOLMES, R. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel.* London: Bloomsbury, 2020.
[57] DANGERFIELD, G. *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914.* Op. Cit. p 176.
[58] HOLMES, R. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel.* Op. Cit; WINSLOW B. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*. London: Verso, 2021.
[59] WINSLOW, B. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*, Ibid, p. 69.

At the same time, the independent left-wing national daily newspaper, the *Daily Herald,* which played an important role in regularly reporting on and supporting both the women's suffrage campaign as well as workers' strikes, and was supported by a network of League branches that drew into its orbit both sets of activists, was another manifestation of the potential for bridges between the different militant movements.[60] Undoubtedly the *aggregated* impact of the labour and women's movements contributed to the broad *zeitgeist* of extra-parliamentary 'direct action', widespread civil disobedience, threats and use of aggressive and violent behaviour, and defiance of the authorities evident during the Labour Revolt.

Potential and Limitations

The aggressive challenge to the legitimacy of public order and state power mounted by strikers (male and female) produced deep levels of social polarisation during the period 1910-14. As previously noted, in pursuing their immediate goals of increased wages, better working conditions and trade union organisation and recognition, workers were confronted not only with intransigent employers and hesitant union leaders, but also hostile civil, police, military and government authorities. The collective willingness to flout, challenge and defy these established authorities was another difference from the earlier 'New Unionism' strike wave, with the widespread aggressive and often violent militancy during the later 'mass rebellion' contrasting with the largely more peaceful action previously.

Many workers also became disaffected with parliamentary politics as a result of the functioning of the newly-formed Labour Party in the House of Commons, which acted as a mere adjunct of the post-1906 Liberal Party government and frowned on militant industrial struggle. Consequently, the established 'rules of the game' – piecemeal social reform by means of institutionalised collective bargaining and parliamentary action – were widely questioned and put under considerable strain, reinforcing the appeal of combative industrial struggle as the weapon to advance labour movement interests. [61]

It should be noted that trade union organisations and radical left political groups rallied to women strikers' causes, with strikes often generating considerable levels of support from other workers locally, regionally and even nationally. Thus regular financial collections in

[60] LANSBURY, G. *The Miracle of Fleet Street: The Story of the Daily Herald.* Nottingham: Spokesman, [1925] 2009; HOLTON, B. '*Daily Herald* v. *Daily Citizen*, 1912-15: The Struggle for a Labour Daily in Relation to the "Labour Unrest"'. *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 19, n.3, 1974, pp. 347-376.
[61] DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*, Op. Cit.

workplaces, trade union branch and trades council meetings, and public solidarity rallies and demonstrations, all yielded considerable sums and helped to sustain the struggles. Meanwhile, despite only forming a small minority of the labour movement, an enormous level of solidarity was also generated for individual strikes by the radical left. Some were left-wing members of the Independent Labour Party, or the two main Marxist political parties, the Social Democratic Federation (that became the British Socialist Party in 1911) and Socialist Labour Party. Others were supporters of Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League, as well its various offshoots in different industries (including the Unofficial Reform Committee within the South Wales Miners Federation and the broader Amalgamation Committee Movement that campaigned for industrial unionism). And there was also a wider layer involved in the radical working-class education body, the Plebs League and Central Labour College, as well as Independent Socialist Societies and the support groups around the newspapers *The Clarion* and *Daily Herald* newspapers.[62] A small but significant layer of working-class women joined most of these organisations.

Nonetheless, there were some individual setbacks for women strikers, including a partial defeat in the 1911-12 North East Lancashire cotton weavers' lockout (in which women formed the majority of the workforce), which, despite winning a five percent increase in piece rates, failed to establish the union closed shop.[63] And there was a significant defeat of the 11 000 strikers at the 1911 Singer Clydebank plant (involving a sizeable minority of women workers), with the systematic victimisation of leading activists and the virtual collapse of trade unionism.[64]

In addition, there was inevitably often a problem with the development of female union activism arising from the way in which women had a dual burden of domestic work in the home and paid work outside it. Evening meetings were very difficult to organise and often unsuccessful – with evenings used by women for sewing, baking, pressing and cleaning, and with little time for rest or reading, let alone listening to speakers at a meeting.[65] Thus there was a problem of encouraging women on the shop floor to participate in decision-making processes

[62] DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14.* Op. Cit.
[63] WHITE, J. L. *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers, 1910-1914*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978.
[64] Glasgow History Workshop, *The Singer Strike, Clydebank, 1911*, Clydebank: Clydebank District Library, 1996; Glasgow History Workshop, 'A Clash of Work Regimes: "Americanisation" and the Strike at the Singer Sewing Machine Company, 1911'. In KENEFICK, W. and MCIVOR, A. (eds.), *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910-1914?: Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland* (pp. 193-213). Op. Cit.
[65] THOM, D. 'The Bundle of Sticks: Women, Trade Unionists and Collective Organisation'. Op. Cit, pp. 276-277.

of the union rather than their more highly educated middle-class sisters making the decisions for them.[66]

Moreover, despite the way NFWW branches experienced resounding victories in disputes with employers, resulting in initially high recruitment of new members, numbers could then fall, with branches effectively falling by the wayside, unless there were either national organisers or reliable local activists to build up rank-and-file participation and organise programmes of educational and social events. Problems arose from intimidation of members by employers, the absence of willing, capable volunteers able to co-ordinate activities, the insecurity and enforced temporary nature of employment, poor attendance at branch meetings, which were often held in the evenings, difficulties for women in continuing to pay their subscriptions, and lack of male support. The larger textile unions appear to have had greater success than the federation in recruiting and retaining women members; it was clearly more difficult to sustain membership of a trade union where there was no history of organisation within a trade.[67]

There were also continuing gendered divisions within the labour force generally, with the 1913 Midlands metal workers' strikes resulting in lower pay deals for women workers as the WU failed to challenge the practice of paying unskilled girls and women *less* than unskilled boys and men of the same age, and accepted the notion of the 'family wage' that privileged male workers who, the union believed, were their natural constituency.[68] The much-heralded new industrial union that emerged in 1910 from the amalgamation of three existing unions into the National Union of Railwaymen rejected the proposal to call itself the 'National Union of Railway Workers' – decreeing that women (13 000 of whom were employed by railway companies) were ineligible for membership. And total female union membership, despite increasing to 427 000 by 1914, still represented only eight percent of the female workforce.

At the same time, there remained a yawning gulf between the militant labour (including radical left) and suffrage 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-

[66] S. KIRTON, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists.* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 158.
[67] HUNT, C. 'The Fragility of the Union: The Work of the National Federation of Women Workers in the Regions of Britain, 1906-1914'. In DAVIES, M. (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting it?'* (pp. 171-189) Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2011.
[68] STAPLES, C.L. and STAPLES W.G. '"A Strike of Girls": Gender and Class in the British Metal Trades, 1913'. Op. Cit; LEWENHAK, S. *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement.* Op. Cit, p. 141.

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 as well as the suffrage movements. On the one 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. On the other hand, 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. As a result, even though there were some important interconnections, this did not fundamentally overcome the way in which the Labour Revolt and suffrage revolt generally remained on separate parallel tracks.[69]

[69] DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit.