

SYLVIA PANKHURST ON SOCIALISM



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Sylvia Pankhurst and Socialism

The Pankhurst name is mainly associated with the Suffragette Movement, as Christabel Pankhurst and her mother Emmeline (“Mrs Pankhurst”) were the most prominent leaders of the Votes for Women movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Christabel's younger sister, Sylvia (born 1882) was also involved in the suffrage campaigns, but in addition she came to adopt ideas and aims which are of more interest to those who advocate a socialist world.

The Pankhursts' Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed in 1903, supported votes for women on the same basis as that which obtained for men at the time, i.e. based on a property qualification. Whatever its intention, given the situation where most property was held in the name of husbands rather than wives, this would have had the effect of enfranchising only a relatively small number of women, and clearly only rich women. Sylvia Pankhurst, however, came to support the more democratic position of general adult suffrage. Along with other suffragettes, she met many women from London's East End while serving time in prison for suffragette activities, and was impressed by the courage these women showed in enduring the appalling prison conditions.

In 1912 she moved to the East End herself and became an early practitioner of a kind of “community politics”. Most men living there did not have the vote either, so the standard WSPU demand was of little local relevance. The East London Federation of the WSPU took on wider social concerns than just the vote, but Sylvia was expelled from the WSPU by her mother and sister, who could not tolerate any other source of power in the organisation. In 1914 she set up the East London Federation of the Suffragettes, with its paper the *Woman's Dreadnought*, which she edited.

The ELFS supported adult suffrage, but also organised nurseries and cheap restaurants during the First World War, as well as defending workers of German origin who were attacked by

jingoistic mobs. It was renamed the Workers' Suffrage Federation in 1916, though this new name still failed to reflect its true range of interests, and the following year its paper became the *Workers' Dreadnought*. The paper's anti-war stance and its coverage of strikes earned it an influence far beyond the East End.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had an enormous impact on Pankhurst and the WSF (as on the Left in general), and much of their energy was redirected towards defending the new state and opposing Allied intervention against it. The WSF name was modified to Workers' Socialist Federation, and soviets or councils were now seen as the preferred means of organisation. Pankhurst proposed household soviets, so that “mothers and those who are organisers of the family life of the community” should be represented—a useful reminder that not everyone would be included in work-based bodies.

The WSF has been praised in fulsome terms:

“From 1918 to 1921, the Workers' Socialist Federation was a unique revolutionary organization. It challenged the male domination of socialist politics, for even though its all-female membership changed over time to admit men, women continued to be the major leaders and activists. The WSF campaigned on a whole range of women's issues (such as women's and children's health care, schooling and domestic work) and also participated in workers' struggles in the East End, as well as in struggles nationally and internationally”

(Barbara Winslow: *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*).

As the examples show, though, these activities were reformist, not revolutionary.

Along with the Socialist Labour Party and the British Socialist Party, the WSF was one of the groups involved in the unity talks to set up the Communist Party of Great Britain. Having gone over to full-scale admiration for soviets, Pankhurst opposed the pro-parliamentary sections in the unity talks. She argued not just that

parliament could not be used for “revolutionary” purposes (which was generally agreed), but that it could not be used by revolutionaries for any purpose. Accordingly, the WSF withdrew from the unity talks to form the strangely-named Communist Party (British Section of the Third International) in 1920. The aim of this move – widely condemned at the time as jumping the gun – was to persuade the British Left to adopt anti-parliamentarism and reject affiliation to the Labour Party.

Pankhurst's stance was attacked by Lenin in the chapter on Britain in his *"Left-Wing" Communism, an Infantile Disorder*. He quoted Pankhurst as saying that the Communist Party must not compromise. Not so, said Lenin: it was essential to help the Labour leaders defeat the Tories and Liberals, so that workers should see the results of a Labour government. The cause of Communism, he went on, would be furthered, not betrayed, by calls for workers to vote Labour, as a Labour government would soon lead to disillusion. These ideas are purely opportunist and dishonest and, of course, the events foreseen by Lenin failed to materialise. But his views did foreshadow the compromises and lies that have been typical of Bolshevik groups.

Pankhurst and the CP(BSTI) were, however, convinced by Lenin's arguments, and most of the organisation's branches joined the new CPGB soon after it was founded, though she continued to produce the *Workers' Dreadnought* as a separate paper. The “unified” CP, however, was anything but unified, and when the *Dreadnought* began publishing the views of oppositionists within Russia as well as arguing the anti-parliamentary line, the CPGB and their Moscow masters objected. In September 1921, once she had been released from a prison sentence for sedition and refused to hand the paper over to CP control, Pankhurst was expelled. She now set up the Communist Workers' Party, which had the aim of abolishing the wages system, but this never amounted to anything much and it collapsed by 1924, when the *Workers' Dreadnought* also ceased publication. Her later career is of little moment – she joined the Labour Party in 1948, and died in Ethiopia in 1960, after

exposing Italy's invasion of the country and becoming an admirer of Emperor Haile Selassie.

However, Pankhurst's views for a time during the early twenties were of great interest. She could never be accused of consistency, but she did propagate the view that Socialism/Communism meant a moneyless, classless community, and that what was being built in Russia was capitalism, not any variety of socialism. She explicitly described the New Economic Policy, introduced there in 1921, as "reversion to capitalism". And consider these extracts from her writings:

"Our aim is Communism. Communism is not an affair of party. It is a theory of life and social organisation. It is a life in which property is held in common; in which the community produces, by conscious aim, sufficient to supply the needs of all its members; in which there is no trading, money, wages, or any direct reward for services rendered" (1923).

"The Russian workers remain wage slaves, and very poor ones, working, not from free will, but under compulsion of economic need, and kept in their subordinate position by a State coercion which is more pronounced than in the countries where the workers have not recently shown their capacity to rebel with effect" (1924).

To the extent that the Left pay attention to Sylvia Pankhurst today, she is usually derided as a sectarian "ultra-leftist" who placed inflexibility and loyalty to her own organisation above the idea of unity. But she is better seen as someone who saw through the unprincipled and dishonest tactics of the Bolsheviks and their British followers, and who realised that Russia was not undergoing a transformation to Socialism. Her opposition to using parliament for revolutionary purposes was a mistake, caused by her overwhelming enthusiasm for the supposed successes of the soviets in Russia. She deserves, however, to be remembered as more than just an object of Lenin's criticism.

The Future Society

Sylvia Pankhurst

The words Socialism and Communism have the same meaning. They indicate a condition of society in which the wealth of the community: the land and the means of production, distribution and transport are held in common, production being for use and not for profit.

Socialism being an ideal towards which we are working, it is natural that there should be some differences of opinion in that future society. Since we are living under Capitalism it is natural that many people's ideas of Socialism should be coloured by their experiences of life under the present system. We must not be surprised that some who recognise the present system is bad should yet lack the imagination to realise the possibility of abolishing all the institutions of Capitalist society. Nevertheless there can be no real advantage in setting up a half-way-house to socialism. A combination of Socialism and Capitalism would produce all sorts of injustice, difficulty and waste. Those who happen to suffer under the anomalies would continually struggle for a return to the old system.

Full and complete Socialism entails the total abolition of money, buying and selling, and the wages system.

It means the community must set itself the task of providing rather more than the people can use of all the things that the people need and desire, and of supplying these when and as the people require them.

Any system by which the buying and selling system is retained means the employment of vast sections of the population in unproductive work. It leaves the productive work to be done by one portion of the people whilst the other portion is spending its energies in keeping shop, banking, making advertisements and all

the various developments of commerce which, in fact, employ more than two-thirds of the people today.

Given the money system, the wage system is inevitable. If things needed and desired are obtainable only by payment those who do the work must be paid in order that they may obtain the means of life. The wages system entails such institutions as the old-age pension, sick and unemployment insurance and widow's pensions, or the Poor Law, and probably plus the Poor Law. These involve large numbers of people drawn from productive work to do purely administrative work. Thus useless toil is manufactured, and the burden of non-producers maintained by the productive workers is increased.

Moreover social conditions are preserved which are quite out of harmony with Communist fraternity. The wage system makes the worker's life precarious. The payment of wages entails the power to dismiss the worker by an official or officials.

So long as the money system remains, each productive enterprise must be run on a paying basis. Therefore it will tend to aim at employing as few workers as possible, in order to spend less on wages. It will also tend to dismiss the less efficient worker who, becoming unemployed, becomes less efficient. Thus an unemployable class tends to grow up.

The existence of a wage system almost inevitably leads to unequal wages; overtime, bonuses, higher pay for work requiring special qualifications. Class distinctions are purely differences of education, material comfort and environment.

Buying and selling by the Government opens the door to official corruption. To check that, high salaried positions are created in order that those occupying them have too much to lose to make pilfering and jobbery worthwhile.

Originally published in *One Big Union Bulletin*, 2 August 1923.

Socialism

Sylvia Pankhurst

Socialism means plenty for all. We do not preach a gospel of want and scarcity, but of abundance.

Our desire is not to make poor those who to-day are rich, in order to put the poor in the place where the rich now are. Our desire is not to pull down the present rulers to put other rulers in their places.

We wish to abolish poverty and to provide abundance for all.

We do not call for limitation of births, for penurious thrift, and self-denial. We call for a great production that will supply all, and more than all the people can consume.

Such a great production is already possible, with the knowledge already possessed by mankind.

To-day production is artificially checked, consumption still more so.

How is production checked?

Production is checked by private ownership of land, the means of production and transport. In Scotland large areas of agricultural land are turned into deer forests. In every English county numerous large private parks are kept for the pleasure of single families. Production on farms is limited because farmers lack capital to enable them to employ the labour and materials necessary to work their land fully. Landowners with capital find more profitable means of employing their capital in agriculture or stock raising. Country landowners refuse to build cottages on their estates in order to preserve their own privacy. Landowners in and about towns put up the price of land till it becomes prohibitive to the purpose of building houses for any but the rich. Vacant plots remain for years until they are bought for factories or cinemas.

Production is also limited by inability to secure raw material owing to carefully organised cornering of supplies by persons who make money by such immoral practices, and by inability to pay the prices demanded for raw material.

Production is deliberately limited in order to secure high prices for short supplies, and because the market in which the produce can be sold at a profit is limited.

Production is to a minor extent limited by wage-workers in order to keep up the price of labour.

Consumption is cruelly limited by lack of means to purchase.

Our cities teem with people lacking the decencies and necessities of life because they cannot afford to pay. Even Mr. Neville Chamberlain, a Tory Minister of Health, has admitted that a large proportion of the population of this relatively prosperous country is herded together under conditions which are scarcely human.

Entire nations are plunged into scarcity under which the poor die of starvation and even the middle and professional classes are reduced to hunger because the whirligig of finance has reduced the exchange value of the currency of such nations.

Capitalism offers no hope of ending this reign of poverty.

Millions of men and women, trained in the arts of production and transport, are unemployed, factories stand idle or run at half speed, land lies fallow, shops and warehouses teem with goods for which there are insufficient purchasers.

The majority of the population is not engaged in productive work. The greater part of the non-producers is employed in the buying, selling and advertising of the commodities produced by the minority. A large number of non-producers is employed in administering insurance doles, pensions, Poor Law relief and charity to the unemployed and to those whose wages do not suffice to maintain them. A considerable minority is living on rent and dividends drawn from the labour of the producers. This minority includes the people with a small unearned income just

large enough to maintain them, and also the very rich who keep hundreds of persons uselessly employed in waiting upon them, who monopolise thousands of acres of land for their pleasure-grounds, and who sometimes consume inordinate quantities of manufactured goods to satisfy their insatiable desire for artificial pleasure and extravagant display.

This is the private property system.

We wish to replace it by Socialism.

Under Socialism the land, the means of production and transport are no longer privately owned: they belong to all the people. The title to be one of the joint owners of the earth and its products and the inheritance of collective human labour does not rest on any question of inheritance or purchase; the only title required is that one is alive on this planet. Under Socialism no one can be disinherited; no one can lose the right to a share or the common possession.

The share is not so many feet of land, so much food, so many manufactured goods, so much money with which to buy, sell, and carry on trade. The share of a member of the Socialist Commonwealth is the right and the possibility of the abundant satisfaction of the needs from the common store-house, the right to be served by the common service, the right to assist as an equal in the common production.

Under Socialism production will be for use, not profit. The community will ascertain what are the requirements of the people in food, clothing, housing, transport, educational facilities, books, pictures, music, theatres, flowers, statuary, wireless telegraphy - anything and everything that the people desire. Food, clothing, housing, transport, sanitation — these come first; all effort will be bent first to supply these; everyone will feel it a duty to take some part in supplying these. Then will follow the adornments and amusements, a comfortable, cultured and leisured people will produce artistic and scientific work for pleasure, and with spontaneity. Large numbers of people will have the ability and the

desire to paint, to carve, to embroider, to play, and to compose music.

They will adorn their dwellings with their artistic productions, and will give them freely to whoever admires them.

When a book is written the fact will be made known, and whoever desires a copy of it, either to read or to keep, will make that known to the printers in order that enough copies may be printed to supply all who desire the book. So with a musical composition, so with a piece of statuary.

So, too, with the necessaries of life. Each person, each household, will notify the necessary agency the requirements in milk, in bread, and all the various foods, in footwear, in clothing. Very soon the average consumption in all continuous staples will be ascertained. Consumption will be much higher than at present, but production will be vastly increased: all those who are to-day unemployed or employed in the useless toil involved in the private property and commercial system, will be taking part in actual productive work; all effort will be concentrated on supplying the popular needs.

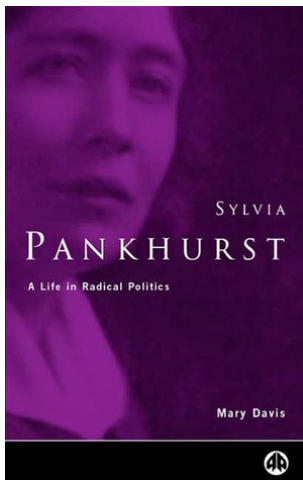
How will production be organised?

Each branch of production will be organised by those actually engaged in it. The various branches of production will be co-ordinated for the convenient supply of raw material and the distribution of the finished product.

Since production will be for use, not profit, the people will be freely supplied on application. There will be no buying and selling, no money, no barter or exchange of commodities.

Workers' Dreadnought, 28 July 1923

Book Review: **Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics.**



By Mary Davis, Pluto Press.

Sylvia Pankhurst, one of the daughters of the famous suffragette leader Mrs (Emily) Pankhurst, will have done at least one thing for modern feminists: drawn their attention to the complexity of the votes issue before 1914.

Most people will probably think that the suffragettes who chained themselves to railings, knocked off policemen's hats, etc were demanding universal suffrage, i.e. votes for all adult men and women. Actually – and this was a conscious policy decision by the Women's Social and Political Union to which they

belonged – they were campaigning for "Votes for Women on the Same Terms as then obtained for Men". But before 1914 not all men had the vote; owing to a property qualification, admittedly fairly low, only about 70 percent of them did. To have extended the vote to women on these terms would (according to one figure quoted by Mary Davis) have enfranchised less than 8 percent of women. Nearly all married women would have remained vote-less as their family's "property" was in the name of their husbands.

The WSPU was aware of this and was prepared to go along with it. This meant that what their militant tactics aimed at was, in the contemporary phrase, "Votes for Ladies", votes for rich women. In other words, they were not democrats who were campaigning for votes for all women but, whether intentionally or not, people whose policy would have strengthened the political power of the propertied class by increasing the proportion of capitalist voters at

the expense of working-class voters. No wonder the Socialists of the time opposed them, as did many ordinary democrats.

However, not all suffragettes were in the WSPU and not all of those in the WSPU favoured this policy aim, Sylvia Pankhurst among them. In fact she fell out with her mother and elder sister over the issue and was expelled from the WSPU in 1914. Her branch became the independent East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) which pursued a different strategy, of including working class women and demanding universal suffrage.

When the war broke out, the WSPU went super-patriotic. The name of their paper was changed from *The Suffragette* to *Britannia* and they began, as Sylvia Pankhurst put it, to hand "the white feather to every young man they encountered wearing civilian dress". She moved in the opposite direction, opposing the war. In 1916 the ELFS changed its name to Workers Suffrage Federation and in 1917 its paper *Woman's Dreadnought* became *Workers' Dreadnought*; in 1918 the WSF became the Workers Socialist Federation. The WSF was one of the organisations involved in the founding of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1921. Pankhurst, however, was by this time an anti-parliamentarian (so much for votes, for men as well as women) and was opposed to the new party seeking to be affiliated to Labour. For this she was denounced by Lenin as an "ultra-leftist". She lasted only six months in the CPGB before being expelled.

The *Workers' Dreadnought* continued to appear until 1924 and was a valuable source of information and documentation on the opposition groups in Russia, including those who argued—as indeed did Pankhurst herself—that Russia was heading for state capitalism not socialism. Mary Davis records that in 1923 Pankhurst set up a rival unemployed organisation to that of the CPGB, "the Unemployed Workers' Organisation (UWO), whose slogan, 'Abolition of the Wages System', was supposed to expose the 'reformist' nature of the demand of its rival - 'Work or Full Maintenance'". This could only have been a gesture, but one Socialists can appreciate.

By 1924 Pankhurst had tired of the working class and radical working-class politics and reverted to being essentially a single-issue reformist. She remained a feminist (deliberately choosing to become "an unmarried mother") advocating such reforms as the introduction of maternity benefit. In 1948 she joined the Labour Party. But from the 1930s on her main centre of interest became Ethiopia. She championed its cause against fascist Italy and came to be a friend of Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1956 she went to live in Ethiopia where she died four years later at the age of 78 and is buried there.

It has been reported (*The Times*, 18 August) that Gordon Brown is supporting the idea that the vacant plinth at Trafalgar Square should be filled by a statue of Sylvia Pankhurst. Evidently, he is unaware that she once advocated the abolition of the wages system and money. Still, come to think of it, better a statue to someone who held this view however briefly than to some warmonger.

Introducing The Socialist Party

The Socialist Party advocates a society where production is freed from the artificial constraints of profit and organised for the benefit of all on the basis of material abundance. It does not have policies to ameliorate aspects of the existing social system.

The Socialist Standard is the combative monthly journal of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, published without interruption since 1904 and infuriating and exasperating political opponents in equal measure. The journal was placed on a list of publications banned for export during World War I for its call for workers not to fight for their countries, and in World War II it evaded the censor largely by producing articles on ancient wars as cover for the Party's implacable opposition to the conflict.

In the 1930s the Socialist Standard explained why capitalism would not collapse of its own accord, in response to widespread claims to the contrary, and continues to hold this view in face of the notion's recent popularity. Beveridge's welfare measures of the 1940s were viewed as a reorganisation of poverty and a necessary 'expense' of production, and Keynesian policies designed to overcome slumps an illusion. Today, the journal exposes as false the view that banks create money out of thin air, and explains why actions to prevent the depredation of the natural world can have limited effect and run counter to the nature of capitalism itself.

Gradualist reformers like the Labour Party believed that capitalism could be transformed through a series of social measures, but have merely become routine managers of the system. The Bolsheviks had to be content with developing Russian capitalism under a one-party dictatorship. Both failures have given socialism a quite different -- and unattractive -- meaning: state ownership and control. As the Socialist Standard pointed out before both courses were followed, the results would more properly be called state capitalism.

The Socialist Party is not a left-wing organisation nor its journal a left-wing journal. 'Left-wing' has simply become an umbrella designation for parties and organisations demanding modifications to how we now live. The Party and the World Socialist Movement affirm that capitalism is incapable of meaningful change in the interests of the majority; that the basis of exploitation is the wages/money system. The Socialist Standard is proud to have kept alive the original idea of what socialism is -- a classless, stateless, wageless, moneyless society or, defined positively, a democracy in which free and equal men and women co-operate to produce the things they need to live and enjoy life, to which they have free access in accordance with the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'.

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Object and Declaration of Principles

This declaration is the basis of our organisation and, because it is also an important historical document dating from the formation of the party in 1904, its original language has been retained.

Object

The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.

Declaration of Principles

The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds:

1. That society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e. land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.
2. That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle between those who possess but do not produce and those who produce but do not possess.
3. That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.
4. That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom, the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind, without distinction of race or sex.

5. That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.

6. That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation,

exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organize consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.

7. That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

8. The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.

