

OUR HISTORY - 66

Sylvia Pankhurst - Communism and its Tactics (1921)

Sylvia Pankhurst was one of the three daughters of Richard and Emmeline Pankhurst. She was active in the suffragette movement but adopted a more radical position than her mother and her sister Christabel. Whereas Emmeline and Christabel supported the war effort, Sylvia took an anti-war position. In 1913, Sylvia established the East London Federation of Suffragettes as a working class based militant feminist organisation. In May 1918, the organisation was transformed into the Workers Socialist Federation, with its journal the *Women's Dreadnought*, becoming the *Worker's Dreadnought*. Pankhurst adopted an anti-parliamentary position and collaborated with other libertarians including her partner, the Italian anarchist, Sylvio Corio. She was active in the workers council movement and in the discussions which led to the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. Meeting Lenin in Moscow, she was later the subject of Lenin's critique in *Left Wing Communism - an Infantile Disorder*.

Pankhurst was an opponent of the authoritarian communism of the British Socialist Party, and had some sympathy with the syndicalist position of the Socialist Labour Party. She resisted the BSP's attempt to merge the *Dreadnought* with their journal *The Call*. She then established her own communist grouping, which she designated as the Communist Party, British section of the Third International or CP (BSTI). However with the failure of negotiations to merge with the new CPGB, many of Pankhurst's supporters rejected her leadership and defected to the new organisation. *The Dreadnought* actually survived until 1924, though Pankhurst's new group, The Communist Workers Party was a small East End based propaganda group, rather than a political party. In 1924, Pankhurst and Corio moved to Woodford Green in Essex. They had a child, with the couple resuming political activity in 1932 initiating a campaign against Italian fascism and in 1936 establishing a journal opposing Italian fascism and colonialism - *The New Times* and *Ethiopia News*. She befriended Haile Selassie, the exiled Emperor of Ethiopia and after Corio's death in 1954, moved to Addis Ababa, where she published



the *Ethiopia Observer* and wrote a series of books supporting Ethiopian independence until her death in 1960. Her son Richard, who had previously written on early British and Irish socialist and co-operative history, became professor of history at Addis Ababa and a leading writer on Ethiopian history, and in his 80s is still producing historical works as well as co-authoring studies of his mother.

“Under communism all shall satisfy their material needs without stint or measure from the common storehouse, according to their desires. Everyone will be able to have what he or she desires in food, in clothing, books, music, education and travel facilities. The abundant production now possible, and which invention will constantly facilitate, will remove any need for rationing or limiting of consumption. Every individual, relying on the great common generation, will be secure from material want and anxiety.”

“There will be no class distinctions, since these arise from differences in material possessions, education and social status - all such distinctions will be swept away. There will be neither rich nor poor. Money will no longer exist, and none will desire to hoard commodities not in use, since a fresh supply may be obtained at will. There will be no selling, because there will be no buyers, since everyone will be able to obtain everything at will, without payment. The possession of private property, beyond that which is in actual personal use, will disappear. There will be neither masters nor servants, all being in a position of economic equality - no individual will be able to

become the employer of another.”

“With the disappearance of the anxious struggle for existence, which saps the energy and cripples initiative, a new vigour, a new independence will develop. People will have more courage to desire freedom, greater determination to possess it. They will be more exacting in their demands upon life, more fastidious as to their choice of a vocation. They will wish to work at what they enjoy, to order their lives as they desire. Work will generally be enjoyed as never before in the history of mankind. The desire for freedom will be tempered by the sense of responsibility towards the commonweal, which will provide security for all.”