

## PEOPLE/HISTORY

# Sylvia Pankhurst: Who is she and why do we care?

**The symbol of the heroism of thousands of working class women battling for the franchise has yet to gain her due recognition. But the campaign for her statue to be erected outside Parliament continues, reports Kerry Baigent**

SYLVIA Pankhurst (1882-1960) was a socialist feminist who during the campaign for women's suffrage at the turn of the 20th century not only braved the horrors of hunger striking and forcible feeding, but also founded and built a remarkable women's organisation in the East End of London. This group, the East London Federation of Suffragettes, was composed of working class women who campaigned for the vote and for social change in the period 1912-1920. Their weekly paper 'The Woman's Dreadnought' (later, The Workers' Dreadnought), owned and edited by Sylvia, had an enviably high circulation and was influential outside London.

Sylvia's strategy, which linked class and gender, did not find favour with the most famous of the suffrage organisations, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), to which she belonged and the East London Federation was affiliated. The WSPU, (popularly known as the Suffragettes) was founded in 1903 and led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, Sylvia's mother and older sister respectively. They expelled Sylvia from the WSPU in 1914. The WSPU abandoned its early links with the labour movement in 1907, and in 1914 with the outbreak of World War One, it abandoned the suffrage campaign itself. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst ardently supported the war effort and urged all women to do the same. Sylvia did not take their advice. Her organisation was one of the very few to maintain the fight for the vote (its first instalment was granted in 1918).

We believe that Sylvia's strategy, based

as it was on an alliance between class and gender, did far more to win the vote for all women than the more elitist and ultimately diversionary politics of her mother and elder sister.

It is thus richly ironic that the British State has chosen to honour Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's contribution to women's suffrage, with a statue for the former and a plaque for the latter, both outside Parliament, whilst ignoring the role of Sylvia Pankhurst.

Sylvia would not have liked a memorial, but as a symbol of the unsung heroism of thousands of working class women who fought for the franchise and for socialism,

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some kind of recognition in the form of a statue of Sylvia Pankhurst is not only long overdue, but would, at long last, help correct the historical record. Therefore the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee was set up and have worked tirelessly to achieve this goal.

Sylvia Pankhurst was a pioneer in other ways. During her long and active life she founded and edited four newspapers, wrote numerous books and pamphlets,



as well as literally countless articles. She was a founder and tireless activist in a variety of women's, labour movement and international solidarity organisations. A deeply committed anti-racist and anti-fascist, she was involved for over 30 years in campaigning on these issues. They included the cause of Ethiopia – the country that became her home for the last four years of her life and in which she was buried.

The National Women's Committee, alongside Regions and other Sections of the Fire Brigades Union, is affiliated to the Sylvia Pankhurst Memorial Committee and fully support the campaign to achieve a statue of Sylvia sited on College Green, Westminster.

Sylvia will be looking towards the Palace of Westminster from which women were excluded. This links directly to her campaign "Give Women the Vote". In 1914, Sylvia, recently released from prison, threatened an indefinite hunger and thirst strike until Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith, agreed to meet a delegation of working women.

The meeting took place and as Sylvia was so weak she had to be carried from the statue of Richard the Lionheart outside the Lords, to the St Stephens entrance outside the Commons. Both of these places are in her statue's line of vision looking towards the Palace of Westminster.

**Kerry Baigent** is National Women's Secretary.