**Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist, Anti-imperialist … and *Social Worker*?**

Because I had been a suffragette and had fought for the cause of women, the women [of the East End of London] came to me and asked me to help them. I had dying babies brought to me. I had to start clinics and find accommodations for people whose fathers were fighting … I used to sit up all night writing, begging for money for these people. We had good families of people coming to my house without a penny and with six or seven children, and I opened two penny restaurants where you could get two penny meals … But I know it is all palliatives; it will not do any good really; I want to change the system.

(Sylvia Pankhurst, cited in Winslow, 1996: pxix)

**Introduction**

Sylvia[[1]](#footnote-1) Pankhurst (1882-1960) was born in Manchester, in the North of England, and is well-known as being one of the formidable Pankhurst family (alongside her mother, Emmeline, and sisters, Christabel and Adela). The Pankhursts were militant, direct-action Suffragettes. They were founding and leading members of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) that was active in the campaign for ‘Votes for Women’ from 1903 – 1917 and whose slogan was ‘Deeds not words’ (Harrison 2004). Sylvia worked full-time, though unpaid, for the organisation from 1906 until she was expelled for refusing to break with the labour movement at her sister Christabel’s behest in January 1914.

Yet the struggle for women’s right to vote was only a small part of her political engagement (and at the forefront of her activities for just over 10 years). Far less well-known is the fact that Pankhurst was an active socialist, and founder member of the Communist Party in Britain. She was an anti-racist, anti-fascist and anti-Imperialist in the inter-war period and, later in life, a strong supporter of anti-colonial struggles. Indeed from 1956 until her death in 1960, she lived and worked in Ethiopia trying to support and build a hospital network in the country. Further, as Davis notes: “During her long and active life Sylvia founded and edited four newspapers, [and] wrote and published 22 books and pamphlets (not to mention literally countless articles)” (1999: p2).

Sylvia Pankhurst was a life-long activist who spent her time fighting against oppression and injustice. Her activities go much further than ‘simply’ being a Suffragette – though her bravery and audaciousness in this field should not be forgotten (she was imprisoned for the first time in October 1906 and by 1914 had been imprisoned a further 8 times for her Suffragette activities, and whilst in prison, she continued her fight by going on hunger strike, and, latterly, thirst and sleep strikes). She was a heroic activist, a thorn in the side of the establishment, but was she a social worker?

One simple answer to this question would be a straight ‘No’. Pankhurst never trained as, or described herself as a social worker. She was never directly involved in individual case-work with families that many identify as key to the social work role. Neither was she actively involved with the Settlement Movement of the early twentieth century, even though there were active Settlements in the areas where she lived and worked.

Nevertheless, I want to argue that Pankhurst’s work (particularly in the period 1912-1917) marks her out as a radical social work pioneer.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the role of the social worker was less clearly defined. As Burnham points out:

The phrase ‘social work’ referred to any activity which improved the lot of individuals, families, communities or society – education, legal aid, children’s holidays, voluntary visiting, health treatments, maternity clinics, free school meals

(Burnam 2014)

Indeed across the globe today the framework of what social work involves remains very broad. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were a host of people involved in a broad range of activities that the profession has been happy to label ‘early’ or ‘pioneering’ social workers even though the practitioners were not trained, or didn’t act in ways that, today we would ‘recognise’ as social work. In the context of the time, the radical social welfare work that Sylvia Pankhurst was involved with included important, and at the time innovative, social work practices. These activities were intimately connected to her social movement activity and were an example of what I have, elsewhere, termed ‘popular social work’ (Lavalette and Ioakimidis 2011; Jones and Lavalette 2014).

This article starts by offering a brief biography of Sylvia Pankhurst’s early years and the main influences on her thinking and political activities. It will then move on to look at her welfare work between 1912 and 1917 before finally looking at the lessons social work today can draw from Pankhurst’s activities.

**Sylvia Pankhurst: the early years**

Sylvia Pankhurst was born in 1882, the second daughter of Emmeline Goulden and Richard Pankhurst. The Pankhursts were a politically active family: reforming, radical Liberals; supporters of Irish Home Rule and abolition of the House of Lords; pacifists; republicans; agnostics, and supporters of the campaign for the extension of the franchise and votes for women. Writing in 1931, Sylvia talked about the importance of the political home she was brought up in, and in particular, the role played by her father:

Our father, vilified and boycotted yet beloved by a multitude of people in many walks of life, was a standard bearer of every forlorn hope, every unpopular yet worthy cause then conceived for the uplifting of oppressed and suffering humanity … His struggle was the background of our lives and his influence, enduring long after his death, the strongest determining factor. (1931/1977: p87)

Richard was a trained lawyer and contemplated standing for Parliament for the Liberals. His views, however, were too controversial for the mainstream party. In 1883 he broke with Liberalism and stood for Parliament as an Independent in Manchester (though he lost heavily). The following year he helped set up a Radical Association, and in 1885 stood for Parliament once more, this time in a seat in London, though once again he was unsuccessful.

The family moved to London in 1887. Richard and Emmeline threw themselves into various campaigns and fully engaged with a range of literary, artistic and cultural movements of their age. Their home became

a meeting place for intellectuals and activists from around the world – socialists, anarchists, radicals, republicans, feminists, atheists and freethinkers. … The revolutionary artists … William Morris was a constant visitor [as were] … Tom Mann, an internationally known trade union leader … Annie Beasant, a leader of the London match girls’ strike, freethinker, birth control advocate and sexual radical. Harriot Stanton Blatch … a member of the Women’s Franchise League.

(Winslow, 1996: pp1/2)

Others such as the Italian anarchist refugee Errico Malatesta, the first Indian member of the UK Parliament Dadabhai Naoroji, French Communard Louise Michel, Fabian and writer George Bernard Shaw, the first Labour MP Keir Hardie and Labour MP (and future Labour leader) George Lansbur, were all visitors to the family home. These visitors Harrison suggests “provided models for Sylvia’s crusading adult years” (2012: p44).

The parents established a household where their children were encouraged to engage with new and challenging ideas. The children (Christabel [bn 1880], Sylvia, Frank [bn1884, though died 1888], Adela [bn 1885] and Harry [bn 1889]) were taught at home and expected to read widely. Sylvia notes that her father brought:

a book home to us every night; history, travel, simple science, astronomy, botany, chemistry, engineering, fairy-tales, standard novels, reproductions of works of art, the best illustrations. (Pankhurst 1931/1977: p67)

From an early age one of their tasks was to coordinate the arrangements in the home for meetings, including organising for these to be appropriately chaired (Harrison 2012).

The intellectual atmosphere of the home was further enhanced by the family’s involvement with the developing political and social movements of the time. Here, there are three important elements to consider.

First, and in general, the last two decades of the nineteenth century were characterised by a period of growing intellectual interest in the lives and living conditions of the ‘outcast population’ in the inner cities of Britain. A wide range of ‘social problems’ were revealed that created key discussions and debates regarding the apparent ‘crisis of British society’ (Langan and Schwartz 1985). Some of the concerns included: the uses and perceived misuses of the vote (as a consequence of increased numbers of working class male voters); the political, moral and health issues associated with urban living; the fear of the ‘mob’ (on the streets, in riots, during strikes); the fear of crime (especially after the ‘Ripper’ murders of 1888); concern at growing (Jewish) migration and importation of ‘alien’ political philosophies; the relative decline in Britain’s economic performance and the rise of the Newly Industrialising Economies of Germany and the US, and the impact of poverty on the Empire and the ‘British race’ (leading to interest in eugenics) (see Cunningham and Lavalette 2016 pp20-25).

In different ways these concerns impacted upon intellectual interests in science, society and the arts. They were displayed, for example, in the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists, the arts and craft movement, and the writings of Dickens. They shaped debates regarding the works of Darwin on evolution, or Le Bon’s work on crowds and ‘the mob’, and stimulated interest in the new discipline of sociology. These and similar debates were taking place within the Pankhursts’ milieu.

Second, this was a period of considerable debate surrounding the nature and possibilities of working class organisation and representation and how to bring about political change – and the Pankhurst household hosted various different protagonists to these debates.

This was an era that witnessed the growth of working class political parties. The Democratic Federation was established in 1881, changing its name (and committing to socialism) in 1884 when it became the Social Democratic Federation. The Fabian Society was formed in 1884, the Socialist League in 1885, The Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1893 and the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. In the late nineteenth century the distinctions between ‘reform and revolution’ and between, what the American socialist Hal Draper called, ‘socialism from above’ and ‘socialism from below’ (Draper 1996), were still being established and fought over. These organisations took varying positions over issues such as Irish Home Rule, the Boer War, women’s suffrage, and strike action (with most seeing strikes as, at best, a diversion and, at worst, a hindrance, to the progressive movement.)

In 1894 Richard and Emmeline joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP). At the 1898 ILP Conference Richard moved a resolution ‘deploring’ the actions of “trades unionists in resorting to strikes to obtain industrial reform” and arguing, instead, for “political action for labour reform” (Connelly 2013: p11)

Third, the end of the 1880s saw the growth of a massive wave of working class strike activity termed the ‘New Unionism’ (Charlton 1999). In July 1888 young teenage girls at the Bryant and May match factory went on strike in defence of three of their colleagues (Raw 2011). The Match Girls Strike started a mass wave of protest involving hundreds of thousands of semi- and unskilled workers. The strike wave was led by a new layer of trade union leaders and activists whose politics were shaped by ‘syndicalism’ – the idea that the working class should not be concerned with Parliamentary politics but instead use its economic power (to withdraw their labour through strike action) to create a better world. New Unionism ushered in a period of intense class struggle that lasted (with periodic ups and downs) until the outbreak of the First World War.

The Pankhursts had no direct involvement in solidarity work for strikers in the late 1880s and 1890s, beyond occasional contributions to strike funds. However, there are two points worth considering for Sylvia’s future development. In 1893 the family moved back to Manchester and the move coincided with a harsh winter and an employer’s offensive which led to increasing unemployment. In Manchester Sylvia joined her mother on Saturdays to help with the distribution of food to the poor:

Unemployment was spiralling out of control. There was no state insurance, no unemployment benefit, and the Boards of Guardians gave no relief to the able-bodied. Dr Pankhurst had organised a relief committee, which attempted to feed at first 1,000 and then 2,000 people a day. (Harrison, 2012: p50)

Such activity brought Sylvia into direct contact with working class Manchester and the reality of poverty and destitution. As she noted, it made her:

Heartsick at the grim sight of those hungry thousands waiting in the bitter cold to receive that meagre aid. (1931/1977: p129)

In many ways the move to Manchester, and membership of the ILP, represented a move ‘into politics’ and ‘away from social movement activity’ for the Pankhurst family as a whole, but this is not how it was experienced by Sylvia. The move to Manchester allowed Sylvia to go beyond the confines of the home and engage with working class activists from the ILP and working class communities in Lancashire. In 1895 Richard stood for Parliament in the Gorton seat in Manchester (again he would lose). Sylvia went door-to-door canvassing for him where she came across the “misery of the poor” in their “grey slums” that were “lacking the very necessities of life” (1931/1977: p1`26). She joined the Clarion Cycling Club and would spend her week-ends cycling to various northern towns to deliver propaganda and speeches (Lavalette 2013), and it was on these trips that she met many working class women trade unionists in the textile towns. It was this close contact with working class communities and organisation that would shape Sylvia’s distinctive politics over the next two decades.

In 1898 Richard Pankhurst died suddenly, which had a huge impact on Sylvia.

Richard’s death also placed the family in a degree of financial distress and they had to move home and sell some of their possessions. Charles Rowley, a philanthropist and organiser of cultural events in working class Ancoats in Manchester, was asked his opinion about a number of the family’s paintings (Waters 1990). Rowley, a friend of William Morris’s, was more interested in Sylvia’s art work, and the family were encouraged to send Sylvia’s work to the Municipal School of Art. As a result, she obtained a free scholarship, and would go on to win a studentship which allowed her to travel and study in Venice (1902) and later, to win a scholarship to the Royal College of Art in London (1904). As a talented artist Sylvia would design many of the flags, banners, symbols and medals of the WSPU, including its official emblem.

Richard’s death also brought Sylvia very close to Keir Hardy. Their friendship – as mentor, then lover – would keep Sylvia within the orbit of the ILP and labour movement (Benn 1997), at a time when her mother and older sister were moving away from the politics of labourism. According to Winslow:

Their friendship and later love affair developed Pankhurst’s attitudes towards love, marriage and sexuality as well as her political commitment to socialism and feminism. The relationship with Hardie also affected Pankhurst’s relationship with her mother and sister. To Pankhurst, Hardie was a friend, father figure and mentor, as well as a lover, and their relationship, which lasted from 1904 to 1913 or 1914, strengthened her political convictions and activism. It enabled her to stand up to her mother and Christabel as they not only broke from socialist politics but also turned on her. (Winslow 1996: p4)

In October 1903 the WSPU was set up at a meeting in the Pankhurst home. Although Sylvia was fully involved with the organisation, she left Manchester in 1904 to take up her place at the Royal College of Art, whilst there she set up the Fulham branch of the WPSU. In October 1906 she faced imprisonment for the first time, spending 14 days in Holloway Gaol for ‘using abusive language’. Sylvia was appalled by prison conditions and wrote about them on her release – something that brought her into conflict with Christabel who argued for no ‘distractions’ from the central message of votes for women. This was the start of growing political disagreements between Sylvia and her mother and sister.

In 1906 the WSPU formally severed ties with the ILP and the following year Emeline and Christabel left the organisation, with Christabel claiming that socialists could not be allies of women in the struggle for women’s rights. By 1910 she was arguing that all men, especially working class men, were the enemy (Winslow 1996). Indeed Christabel wasn’t just dismissive of working class men, but also working class women. In 1914 Christabel told Sylvia that:

A working women’s movement was of no value: working women were the weakest portion of the sex …Their lives were too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the contest. … We want picked women, the very strongest and the most intelligent. (1931/1977: p517)

The Suffragette Movement, Christabel argued, should concentrate on recruiting women from wealthy and aristocratic backgrounds, who politicians would be much more likely to listen to and respect. In 1906 Christabel argued that:

Members of Parliament … [in the] House of Commons … were more impressed by the feminine bourgeoisie than the feminine proletariat.

(Christabel Pankhurst, quoted in Winslow, 1996: p32)

Further, from its outset, the WSPU accepted the principle of a limited franchise, linked to a property requirement, so in a very real sense working class women were not their ‘constituency’.

But these were not positions shared by Sylvia who remained a member of the ILP and close, politically and personally, to Hardie; though she refused to speak out against the Suffragette activists or air her grievances in public. Indeed she carried on her suffragette activities which led to her arrest on several occasions. Inside the prison she joined the hunger strikes and was released and re-arrested under the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act (1913), more commonly known as the ‘Cat and Mouse Act’. This act meant hunger strikers would be released when their health deteriorated, then re-arrested to serve their sentence once they had recovered their strength on the outside. Under the Cat and Mouse Act Sylvia was arrested 8 times between February 1913 and August 1914.

Sylvia was increasingly critical of her mother’s and sister’s political direction. As the Suffragettes moved towards increasingly militant tactics (smashing windows, burning buildings etc) she argued for alliance building (with labour and trade union organisations) and saw the struggle for the vote in class terms. As she argued:

I believed then and always that the movement required, not more serious militancy by the few, but a stronger appeal to the great masses to join the struggle.

(1931/1977: p316)

She was also critical of the lack of democracy and accountability in the WSPU and the way that all major decision making rested in the hands of Christabel and her mother.

Sylvia was also involved in growing labour unrest between 1910-1914 (often called the Great Unrest) and spoke on platforms in defence of strikers (drawing criticisms from Christabel for doing so). During the Great Dublin Lock Out she was involved in solidarity campaigning (including the attempt to organise for workers’ children to be housed in Britain) and spoke with James Connolly and George Lansbury at a large meeting in support of the Dublin workers at the Albert Hall, London.

Behind this more general identification with working class struggle were two other important developments. The first was the impact that the US had on Sylvia. In 1911 and 1912 Sylvia made two trips to the US. There she met Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (of the International Workers of the World Union) and spoke in support of striking New York laundry workers. On her trips she would often speak two or three times a day at a range of meetings, not only about votes for women. She became aware of the deep racist divisions shaping US society and spoke to Black and Native American audiences about their struggle for justice. As well, she spent some time speaking with workers at the Henry Street Settlement in New York and with Jane Addams at Hull House settlement in Chicago (Harrison 2012, Benn 1997, Rowbotham 1973). These experiences reinforced Sylvia’s view of the importance of community organising.

The second element was Sylvia’s move to the East End of London. Sylvia had been working alongside working class London women since 1906. In February that year Sylvia organised a meeting where:

hundreds of East End women marched … carrying red flags … [and] sang the ‘Red Flag’ so loudly that the strangers present must have thought they had made a mistake and that it was a meeting prepared for [trade union leader] Tom Mann.

(Connelly 2013: p21)

Sylvia’s connection with the working women of London had played an increasingly important role in her work. On her return from the US in Autumn, 1912, Sylvia moved to work in the East End, setting up the East London Federation (ELF) of the WSPU. She was joined in this activity by Zelie Emerson, a young woman she met at the Hull House Settlement. Emerson was to be an active participant in the development of the ELF until she was deported back to the US at the outset of World War One (where she went back to work at Hull House). The ELF was made up of working class women (and eventually men). It was open and democratic, and addressed social issues in the area as well as the question of suffrage. For example, in December 1913, it organised a week-long suffrage school.

The lectures and discussions covered a wide range of social problems facing women as workers and as housewives. They included: the legal position of women, wages, housing, infant mortality, sex education, trade unionism, radical and socialist history, female psychology and the effects of hunger striking and forced feeding.

(Winslow 1996: p48)

It was the activities of the ELF that led to the final break between Sylvia and her mother and sister. In January 1914 Sylvia came out of gaol in a weakened state and was immediately summoned to Paris to meet her mother and sister (Christabel had moved to Paris in 1912 to avoid a conspiracy charge). At the meeting Christabel read out the indictment against Sylvia and the ELF, the list of misdemeanours included:

She had spoken at Lansbury’s pro-Larkin meeting, contrary to WSPU policy; she worked with Lansbury – the WSPU ‘did not want to be mixed up with him’; she had a democratic constitution; … the working women’s movement was of no value; … Sylvia had her own ideas and they were not needed. ‘We want all our women to take their instructions and walk in step like an army’ (Harrison 2012: p224)

This split would soon become an unbridgeable chasm.

In August 1914 the First World War began, and Sylvia recoiled in horror as her mother and sister called for a cessation of their political work and advocated a strongly pro-war position. Emmeline and Christabel toured the country making patriotic speeches and dishing out white feathers to young men not in uniform. Their paper *The Suffragette* was renamed *Britannia,* they renamed the WSPU the Women’s Party, and called for conscription of women into war work. In 1917 Emmeline called for British intervention against the Bolsheviks because they withdrew from the war.

In contrast, Sylvia adopted an anti-war position. The newspaper she edited, The *Woman’s Dreadnought*, carried anti-war pieces, including one in August 1914, which argued that German and British workers had much more in common with each other than they did with their respective governing classes. It argued:

How strange! British transport workers – trade union men – are called upon to shoot down German transport workers, and it is not so very long ago, in the time of our industrial war [ie the Great Dock Strike] …when we were fighting the large ship owners, we received with joy the news that these same men had sent us £5,000 to help us in our fight …We said we would never forget their kindness, let us keep our word. (Walker, 1914)

Sylvia then led a series of campaigns that addressed community needs during the war years. By 1917 she was celebrating the Russian Revolution and was active in the *Hands Off Russia* *Campaign*. The following section looks at the legacy of Sylvia’s work in these campaigns.

**Pankhurst, the ELF and radical welfare work (1912-1917)**

Sylvia and Zelie Emerson moved to set up the East London Federation of the WSPU in 1912. This was born out of frustration with WSPU strategy and tactics, but also reflected their desire to create a mass women’s movement. Their early campaigning work stressed that votes for women was not simply a ‘ladies issue’ (meaning a middle class women’s issue) as many in the East End perceived it. They linked the campaign for the vote to other campaigns for prisoner rights, protection of prostitutes, support for strikes, and general political campaigning and improvement to the area. Their aim was to: “Get members to work for themselves and let them feel they are working for their own emancipation.” (Pankhurst, quoted in Winslow, 1996: p 41)

The break with the WSPU deepened this political orientation. The ELF became the East London Federation of Suffragettes (EFLS). They set up a paper, *The Woman’s Dreadnought*, which carried articles on local strikes, living conditions in the East End, food prices and poverty, and provided commentary on national and international events. They opened a ‘Women’s Hall’ which, as well as being the ELFS headquarters, housed a library, a choir and a ‘Junior Suffragettes Club’ for 14-18 year olds. The Hall hosted lectures and concerts and was the base of organised savings clubs. By the summer of 1914 there were five ELFS branches in London’s East End and some of the young women who joined would go on to have long histories in working class politics in the east of the city[[2]](#footnote-2). The ELFS and the *Dreadnought* paper soon became an established and respected presence in the East End and the Women’s Hall became an open space where strikers and activists would hold all manner of meetings and organise solidarity for those involved in strikes and protests.

When war was declared in August 1914 the ELFS faced a quandary. Sylvia was against the war, but others in the organisation took different positions. There was huge pressure on people to conform to the pro-war atmosphere, whilst others were concerned about the implications of the war for their family members (see Pankhurst 1932/1987: p16, 18-30 *passim)*. Sylvia was faced with a dilemma. How could she hold the ELFS together when there were different positions on the war? She suggested there were three positions the organisation could take: continue with their campaigning as if nothing had changed; fight to protect the living conditions of people locally and improve things for those suffering because of war; make political capital out of the situation created by the war. The ELFS position was ‘settled’ at a general members meeting held two days after war was declared where they voted to adopt all three positions! (Connelly 2013: p70). Whilst this may seem contradictory, it allowed the organisation to continue its campaigning work, take up demands relating to hardship during the war and use the *Dreadnought* to address political questions (and voice anti-war arguments).

At the special members meeting the ELFS listed five demands for the Government to act upon, and these became their campaign focus for the next period. The demands were:

1. The government should take control of the food supply ‘in order that all may feed or starve together, without regard to wealth or social position’. Working class women should be consulted on the price and distribution of food;
2. Government committees should provide work for men and women at the trade union rate for the job; women to be paid equal rates to men;
3. A moratorium of household debts;
4. Committees dealing with food prices, employment and relief to include representatives of working class women;
5. Votes for women. (Connelly 2015)

These political demands set the tone for their campaigning work, but war hardship soon required a more practical involvement in community organising. Sylvia recalled:

Women gathered about our door asking for ‘Sylvia’. They had followed and fought … in the hectic Suffragette struggles they turned to her now in these hours of desperate hardship; poor wan, white-faced mothers, clasping their wasted babies … they had no milk for their babies, no food for the elder children, no money for the landlord. (1932/1987: p19)

At the outbreak of war a number of suffrage organisations turned towards ‘charitable work’. The National Union Of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), for example, declared that due to the ‘national crisis’ they were suspending their political activities in order to conduct ‘relief work’ (Davis 1999: p48). If the ELFS had simply provided ‘relief’ they would have been no different from other suffrage organisations. Sylvia was utterly opposed to ‘charity’, she wanted “the need for such charity abolished” and, instead, she pursued the “goal of plenty for all by mutual aid” (1932/1987: p19). Further, she was worried that setting up:

Organised relief, even the kindliest and most understanding, might introduce some savour of patronage or condescension, and mar our affectionate comradeship, in which we are all equals. (1932/1987: p22)

For the duration of the war Sylvia placed demands on both national and local government to provide services that would ease the hardship faced by working class families, and was clear that a general, political solution was needed and that localised welfare could not fully meet people’s needs. As she put it: “no private effort could cope with the great misery around us: it was the responsibility of the Community, of the State … our main duty was to bring pressure to bear on the Government to secure the needs of the people” (1932/1987: p22).

Yet local women and families looked to Sylvia and the ELFS for support in desperate times and the situation required a response. It was one that, Winslow argues, turned the ELSF “from a political organisation that mobilized women to fight for political demands for themselves to a feminist social welfare organisation that attempted to provide the same relief that government should have provided to alleviate the misery caused by war” (1996: p76). It would be wrong, however, to take from this that they stopped campaign work. What marked the ELFS out from other organisations was that they did not drop politics but that welfare provisions and political campaigning became intimately linked. As Davis puts it: “Its social work was not predicated on support for the war effort, and … such work was not its sole preoccupation” (1999: p50)

The initial foray into welfare work was through the provision of free milk for babies, set up within a week of the onset of war. Initially this was thought of as a temporary measure: “I regarded our milk distribution as so temporary a stop-gap, that I made no mention of it in our paper” (1932/1987: p22). Yet soon they were providing milk for 200 babies a day.

Some babies were so malnourished that they could not keep the milk down. So they started to purchase eggs to make albumen water, arranged for a nurse to be in attendance every afternoon and a doctor to have a regular weekly clinic. The doctor was a former WSPU member. In the face of growing hardship, each welfare scheme led to pressure to do more.

By 31 August 1914 the ELFS had opened the first Cost Price Restaurant (CPR). Sylvia argued that the name:

should be a slogan against profiteering, and would carry no stigma of charity … Communal restaurants, supplying first-rate food at cost-price, were in line with our hope of emancipating the mother from the too multifarious and often hugely conflicting labours of the home. (1932/1987: 43)

The cookers, crockery, tables, chairs and food were donated by various benefactors, including local allotments and shopkeepers. The refurbishment was undertaken by “local men from the Rebels’ Social and Political Union” (Harrison 2012: p248). During 1915 the restaurant was serving 400 meals a day (Harrison, 2012: p248). Two course meal tickets cost 2 pence, but those who couldn’t afford that were given tickets for free, but, and this was very important to Sylvia, there was to be no stigma of charity: “every care [was] taken to prevent anyone knowing who had bought and who had been given tickets” (Connelly 2013: p74). Soon other C PRs and milk distribution centres opened across the ELFS network.

The milk distribution and CPRs were organic, community led responses to crisis which developed, almost naturally, out of the ELFS’s history of community organising. Even the anti-socialist, anti-suffrage Evening Times wrote of the ELFS: “Once again the suffragettes are showing that, whatever may be their faults in other directions, they are organisers of rare genius” (quoted in Harrison, 2012: p245). But collective, community responses to hardship couldn’t deal with all the problems people faced.

Before the war the ELFS carried out regular house-to-house canvassing in the East End. This method brought the activists into direct contact with households and garnered stories for the *Woman’s Dreadnought.* This activity continued during the war and as Sylvia notes: “Our canvassers returned to me … with piteous stories of misery accentuated, of hard lives rendered harder” (1932/1987: p22). To deal with this hardship the ELFS set up Distress Bureaus where the ELFS volunteers would take up individual cases and advocate for local families. The Distress Bureaus helped women who had lost their jobs, or had been underpaid, or who were due a ‘separation allowance’ as compensation for the lost wages of a son or husband who had joined the army. They dealt with landlords profiteering by raising rents. They worked with military personnel who had been wounded and were due compensation from the government. As Sylvia noted:

To aid these unhappy souls one must deal with each case in detail, appealing, demanding, exhorting the Government Department, or the Board of Guardians, the landlord, the employer, the Trade Union appropriate to the case. Sometimes one must attend a police court to plead with a magistrate. Occasionally a lawyer’s aid became necessary, and soon we had three firms of solicitors willing to act for us gratuitously” (1932/1987: p23)

At the beginning of 1915 this work was extended by setting up a separate organisation the League of Rights for Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Wives and Relatives where Sylvia worked closely with future councillor and Communist Minnie Lansbury.

Unemployment remained a significant problem in the early phase of the war. The ELFS set up an Employment Bureau to help women find work. As the first Christmas approached, it was also clear that many local children would have to do without presents. To try and address this problem the ELFS opened a toy factory which employed 59 people at 5d (5 pence) an hour “the district minimum wage of the unskilled labouring man. To pay a woman less, and call it charity, was to connive at sweating; and cost what it might, we resolved not to depart from that standard” (1932/1987: p22). The toy factory was an attempt to bring employment, but also a ‘little light into children’s lives’. As in the famous slogan of the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912, it brought ‘bread and roses’.

But finding and creating jobs for women meant addressing the issue of child care. So the ELFS bought a former public house, named it the Mother’s Arms, and opened a nursery run along Montessori lines. For Sylvia both the CPRs and the nursery provision were attempts to socialise the domestic labour tasks normally imposed on women. These were “in line with our hope of emancipating the mother from the too multifarious and often hugely conflicting labours of the home” (1932/1987: p43)

For the poor working class communities of the East End it was simply not possible to provide the resources to fund all these services, so Sylvia had to turn to her contacts from the WSPU. She wrote numerous begging letters stressing the plight of the women and children of the East End and received substantial donations in response. This approach brought some difficulties. Some contributors complained that the ELSF was not “appreciative enough of their wealthy benefactresses” (Winslow 1996: p96). But it was noticeable that the Federation didn’t change its political positions to appease its rich (and conservative) financiers.

Sylvia and the ELFS continued their campaigning activities which included anti-war agitation, campaigning against conscription and opposing oppressive legislation. Perhaps the most notorious piece of oppressive legislation enacted during the war was the all-embracing Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), rushed through Parliament in August 1914. It was draconian and impacted on people’s civil liberties. It prohibited strikes and social protest, it restricted freedom of speech and association and, in Section 40d, represented an attempt by sections of the military to reintroduce the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) in order to “supply un-diseased prostitutes for their troops as a part of military routine” (Pankhurst 1932/1987: p102). The Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in 1864 and 1866 and applied to garrison towns. They required prostitutes to register and undergo regular medical checks for sexually transmitted diseases (thereby allowing ‘clean prostitutes’ to service soldiers). Technically the CDAs only applied to prostitutes, but in reality they were imposed on: “All women residing within the district where it is in force … Any woman can be dragged into Court, and required to prove she is not a … prostitute” (Pankhurst 1914). Thus the Acts were used to harass young working class women as potential ‘carriers of sexually transmitted diseases’. *Section 40d* of DORA made it compulsory for women suspected of being prostitutes to be inspected for venereal diseases and, therefore, re-established aspects of the CDAs . Pankhurst argued the act:

laid innocent women open to blackmail and false imprisonment; it punished women and led men to believe that, since they were … absolved from any guilt in transmitting venereal disease, prostitution was right and necessary

(Winslow 1996: p82)

As part of the campaign against DORA (and against conscription and for human suffrage) the ELFS called a demo in March 1916. 20,000 people took part in what was the largest anti-war demonstration in Britain to that date.

The shift in orientation led to the organisation changing its name to the Workers Suffrage Federation (in March 1916), when it came out for universal suffrage rather than ‘votes for women’ and later, in 1918 to the Workers Socialist Federation, by which time it had branches across the country.

**Conclusion: The radical pioneer**

In the great social movements of the early twentieth century we can glimpse alternative social work practices that, writing elsewhere, Ferguson and I have called social work’s ‘radical kernel’ (Ferguson and Lavalette 2007). That radical kernel was a vision of ‘another social work’, one that links meeting human need, provision of services, involvement of ‘service users’ and engagement in social movement activity. Sylvia Pankhurst should be viewed as a social work ‘radical pioneer’ because, for a period during the First World War, her radical welfare activities were intimately linked to her campaigning within the social movements of the day, and offer a glimpse of early twentieth century ‘popular social work’ at its best.

Some of her work predicts themes that would later appear in the work of Paulo Freire (1970). The purpose of her radical social work was to both meet people’s needs and help them to draw political conclusions about the injustices and iniquities they faced (what Freire called *conscientisation*): the non-profit restaurants posed questions about working class people’s rights to food and pointed to the consequences of war profiteering. The CPRs and the Montessori nursery promoted women’s liberation by socialising domestic labour activities. Her absolute opposition to seeing these services as ‘charities’ or carrying ‘stigma’ chimed with Freire’s demand for *anti-assistentialism* – the conscious rejection of dependency. The CPRs, the nursery facilities and the factory cooperative all point to community based (and community development based) models of intervention. In the Distress Bureaus the volunteers worked with people to advocate on their behalf. Whilst in the campaign against DORA she prefigured human and civil rights based campaigning social work.

Sylvia Pankhurst considered herself a political activist, not a social worker. But there is much that social work can learn from her popular social work and welfare activities between 1912 and 1917. And for these reasons we should claim Sylvia as a radical social work pioneer.

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1. Sylvia Pankhurst was born Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst, but took the name Sylvia. In this piece I refer to Sylvia, rather than Pankhurst, not to show any disrespect – or indeed over-familiarity – but simply to make it clear which of the Pankhurst family I am writing about. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In 1921 30 councillors in Poplar were imprisoned preferring to ‘break the law, not the poor’. Five of the councillors were women, and four, Julia Scurr, Minnie Lansbury, Jennie Mackay and Nellie Creswell were former members of the ELFS (Lavalette 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)