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Women's history

100th Anniversary of The Woman's Dreadnought

- Features - Sexual politics -

Publication date: Saturday 8 March 2014

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Katherine Connelly looks at the pioneering revolutionary newspaper created by working-class suffragettes. Republished from [Counterfire](#).

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/womans_dreadnought1.jpg]

On 8 March 1914 a suffragette demonstration in Trafalgar Square was met by mounted police and considerable violence towards the demonstrators. The next day five women and five men were brought before an angry magistrate who complained "Half Scotland Yard had turned out to keep a lot of desperadoes in order!" [1] While these experiences were hardly new for the suffragette movement, this demonstration represented radical changes afoot in the votes for women campaign.

The demonstration was organised by the East London Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS), a group that only two months before had separated from the largest militant suffragette organisation, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which disapproved of the ELFS's emphasis on building a campaign that centrally involved working-class women. The 8 March demonstration reflected the distinctive politics of the ELFS which was led by the socialist suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst.

The day on which they held their demonstration was itself significant. The 8 March was International Women's Day, which had been initially called for at an international socialist conference in Copenhagen in 1910 by the German socialist Clara Zetkin to draw attention to the struggles of working-class women. [2] The fact that the ELFS chose this day for their demonstration pointed to the working-class and internationalist politics that characterised their organisation.

The demonstration was also the occasion for the launch of a new publication, the ELFS's own newspaper, *The Woman's Dreadnought*, edited by Sylvia Pankhurst. The decision to launch a weekly newspaper is testament to the confidence and daring of the ELFS, especially when it is remembered that Sylvia Pankhurst, who had never edited a newspaper before, had undertaken hunger, thirst and rest strikes in prison to the point that the authorities temporarily released her to ensure she did not die in their custody, and was therefore at constant risk of re-arrest and imprisonment. Indeed, she was re-arrested on the demonstration the *Dreadnought* made its first appearance.

Despite frequent violent re-arrests, imprisonments and hunger strikes, Sylvia Pankhurst ensured the newspaper came out each week; even a policeman arresting her in May 1914 asked her "how I found the time for it". [3] The *Dreadnought*, which ran for ten years, printed articles by campaigners in the feminist, socialist, anti-war and revolutionary movements of the time, was considered so dangerous by the authorities that its offices were subject to several police raids, and the publication became an outstanding example of how investigative journalism can be used to expose injustice and help organise resistance to it.

Reporting "from the working women's point of view"

Sylvia Pankhurst would later recall that the WSPU leader (who was also Sylvia's older sister), Christabel Pankhurst, demanded that the ELFS form a separate organisation on the grounds that:

"a working women's movement was of no value: working women were the weakest portion of the sex: how could it be

otherwise? Their lives were too hard, their education too meagre to equip them for the contest. "Surely it is a mistake to use the weakest for the struggle! We want picked women, the very strongest and most intelligent!" [4]

The ELFS completely rejected this view that richer women were more effective suffragettes, publishing an impassioned defence of the necessity of campaigning "from below" in the first edition of the *Dreadnought*:

"Some people tell us that it is neither specially important that working women should agitate for the Vote, nor specially important that they should have it. They forget that comparatively, the leisured comfortably situated women are but a little group, and the working-women a multitude.

"Some people say that the lives of working-women are too hard and their education too small for them to become a powerful force in winning the Vote, many though they are. Such people have forgotten their history. What sort of women were those women who marched to Versailles?" [5]

"Those Suffragists who say that it is the duty of the richer and more fortunate women to win the Vote, and that their poorer sisters need not feel themselves called upon to aid in the struggle appear, in using such arguments, to forget that it is the Vote for which we are fighting. The essential principle of the vote is that each one of us shall have a share of power to help himself or herself and us all. It is in direct opposition to the idea that some few, who are more favoured, shall help and teach and patronize the others." [6]

The ELFS's insistence on applying to the struggle the principle of self-representation that they saw embodied in the vote also entailed a rejection of Christabel Pankhurst's assumption that all women shared the same interests and therefore richer women could fight on behalf of working-class women. The first edition of the *Dreadnought* declared: "the chief duty of *The Dreadnought* will be to deal with the franchise question from the working women's point of view." [7]

Therefore ELFS members, for the most part women who worked in manual jobs, became the *Dreadnought's* journalists, reporting on the concerns of their own communities and workplaces which, Sylvia Pankhurst later wrote, "produced far truer accounts than any Fleet Street journalist, for they knew what to ask and how to win the confidence of the sufferers." [8] One of these members was Florence Buchan, a jam factory worker who had been sacked when her employers found out she was a suffragette, whose first article exposed the dangerous conditions in jam factories. Her interviews with local striking workers conveyed the sacrifices they made, but also their spirit and humour. Women workers at a preserves and tea packing factory told her that when they tried to go on strike the foreman had locked them in the workroom, and when the women told the male workers what had happened they gave the foreman "a good thrashing"; the women concluded "there are too many bosses". [9]

Hoping to engage widely with the local community, Sylvia Pankhurst initially wanted the *Dreadnought* to be free but this proved unaffordable so they charged a halfpenny for it (half the cost of most political publications) in the first four days after printing after which they distributed the remaining copies from the 20,000 print-run house to house around the East End free of charge.

Going door to door also helped the ELFS to in its aim to connect their political campaign with the economic and social issues of the local community. ELFS members would knock on every door in a particular street, ask the women at home about their lives and then report the conversations they had with the women in the *Dreadnought*, revealing the problems of ordinary people's lives. In one such report one woman told of the domestic abuse she was habitually subjected to when her husband discovered they had run out of money – "they ask you what you've done with it all, and then they start on you", while others spoke of unemployment, hunger and extortionate rents. The ELFS reporter then summarised her political conclusions from the conversations:

"Denial to the Government which calls these women unoccupied.

â€œOne came face to face with the unemployed problem.

"With Poverty. -Housing Question. -Women as Slaves. -Sweating of Women. -Insurance Act as a failure. -Great faith in women. Suffragettes to be found in slums. ' [\[10\]](#)

The *Dreadnought* gained a reputation for amplifying the voices of people that the establishment did not want to hear. The fact that the *Dreadnought* carried stories which it received from people writing into paper about injustices they wanted publicised demonstrates the trust and credibility the publication had built up.

In the First World War the *Dreadnought* exposed the way in which imprisoned Conscientious Objectors were being deported to the warzone in France where, under army jurisdiction, they could be shot. Its front pages reported the dangers of the chemicals women war workers were exposed to in the factories, something that was down-played and denied by their employers. Despite the establishment's attempts to suppress all information about the mutiny in the British army at the notorious army camp at Étaples in France in late September 1917, the *Dreadnought* was able to report this news on its front page because a soldier wrote in:

"The men out here are fed up with the whole b___y lot.

"About four weeks ago about 10,000 men had a big racket in Etaples, and they cleared the place from one end to the other, and when the General asked what was wrong, they said they wanted the war stopped. That was never in the papers. " [\[11\]](#)

The revolutionary newspaper

Throughout its existence the *Dreadnought* sought to represent the most radical section of contemporary social movements. Formed to give expression to the working women's campaign for the vote, it opposed the First World War from the moment it broke out and in 1914 it became the first English publication to print the anti-war speech of the German socialist Karl Liebknecht. [\[12\]](#) In June 1917 *The Woman's Dreadnought* changed its name to *The Workers' Dreadnought*, reflecting the increasing breadth of the campaigns it was taking up. The newspaper championed the Bolshevik Revolution and printed the writings of leading revolutionaries across Europe. In 1920 Sylvia Pankhurst became the first newspaper editor in Britain to employ a black journalist when she invited the Jamaican poet Claude McKay to work on the *Dreadnought*. The *Dreadnought* consistently opposed racism and imperialism and sent its reporters to Ireland to expose atrocities committed by British troops. Sylvia Pankhurst herself paid a high price for her revolutionary newspaper when she was charged under the draconian Defence of the Realm Act and sent to prison for six months in 1921. At her trial she defiantly called for the overthrow of capitalism, telling the court: "this is a wrong system, and has got to be smashed. " [\[13\]](#)

The *Dreadnought* combined radical politics with an innovative journalism that gave expression to the struggles and hopes of ordinary people.

[\[1\]](#) E. S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 530

[2] Counterfire [index](#).

[3] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 6 June 1914, p. 46

[4] E. S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p. 517

[5] A reference to the early days of the French Revolution when a crowd of starving women marched on the Palace of Versailles and forced the King to return to Paris.

[6] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 8 March 1914, p. 3

[7] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 8 March 1914, p. 1

[8] Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement*, p. 526

[9] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 28 March 1914, p. 3 and 21 March 1914, p. 3

[10] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 30 May 1914, p. 44

[11] *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 3 November 1917, p. 875

[12] B. Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: UCL Press Limited), 1996, p. 103; *The Woman's Dreadnought*, 26 December 1914, p. 165

[13] *The Workers' Dreadnought*, 6 November 1920, p. 1.