

# Film review

## Sylvia Pankhurst: Everything is possible

Indianna Purcell

World write, an 'education charity committed to global equality', has produced a new documentary based on the work of the tireless, though unfortunately neglected in Britain, human rights campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst (1882-1960).

Over 100 volunteers produced, researched and made an informative, entertaining film: 'Sylvia Pankhurst: Everything is Possible'.

It draws on exclusive interviews, including with Pankhurst's son Richard, authentic artefacts and parliamentary documents to trace this prominent socialist's inspiring life and work.

Sylvia Pankhurst devoted herself entirely to the women's movement, the rights of the working classes and later, the anti-fascist struggle. The Pankhurst family were well-known for their political activities. Sylvia's parents Emmeline and Richard were militant members of the Independent Labour Party.

Then in 1903, following her father's death, her mother and her sister Christabel famously founded the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) or Suffragettes, for which Sylvia worked full time. However, as the film tells us, Pankhurst was

someone "for whom politics meant social transformation."

She had disagreements with other Suffragettes in 1914 - notably with her own family who, according to the documentary, she saw as pandering to the ruling elite.

Frustrated with the political impotence of a group which broke away from the labour movement to concentrate explicitly on women's right to vote, Pankhurst founded the East London federation of Suffragettes.

Although the federation was initially a development from the WSPU, it was politically broader and even included male members.

Sylvia Pankhurst was fighting for more than women's right to vote. She was fighting in the struggle for working class women's rights and for working class citizens' right to live in an equal society.

This is shown in Sylvia's willingness to highlight working class struggles.

While her mother and sister attempted to build a national campaign for the Suffragettes, Sylvia poured her efforts into the women living in the slums of London's East End. Here the group set up a chain of affordable restaurants, a free clinic and a nursery.

As Mary Davis, author of Sylvia

Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics highlights, this was more effective than the "do-gooding" work of other women's organisations. It was a real effort to provide for the poor and, more significantly, to get working class women involved in the political movements of the time.

Fuelled by inspiration from the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia - which Pankhurst passionately championed - the group began campaigning for wider issues. Later they became known as the Workers' Suffrage Federation and then the Workers' Socialist Federation.

Pankhurst's involvement in the three major political struggles of the time - the fight for socialism, the women's struggle and the Irish struggle for independence - brought her great notoriety among prominent 'politicos'.

Her attempt to build a mass movement of people fighting on behalf of - and more importantly with - the vulnerable, exploited and oppressed gave her a huge impact both nationally and internationally.

Another important aspect of Pankhurst's battles highlighted in the film is her vehement opposition to imperialism. While most of Britain - and significantly her mother and sister - threw themselves into supporting Britain's war efforts, Pan-



Sylvia Pankhurst

hurst strongly denounced the war. She used her paper, the Workers' Dreadnought, to propagate an anti-war agenda.

Alongside this, Pankhurst used the paper to diligently support the workers' revolution in Russia, which she, as many contributors explain, hoped would eventually happen all over the world.

This well-researched documentary crams in a wealth of information in such a short space. It's about time that this fascinating woman's life was paid this small but significant tribute.

**Details of the film's showings are on [worldwrite.org.uk/sylvia pankhurst](http://worldwrite.org.uk/sylvia pankhurst)**

**It doesn't have to be like this**

**Women and the struggle for socialism**

by Christine Thomas



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## Joan Cummins - nurse, socialist, and a fighter to the end

Sue Powell

What can anyone say about their Mum? Don't most people think theirs is special? My mother, Joan Cummins, was a Militant supporter/Socialist Party member from the mid-1970s till her peaceful death on 25 May 2011.

Even before she became a Marxist she and husband Les would give up their sitting room for weekly meetings of the Young Socialists. Long before it became trendy to be Left, she fought for sex education and abortion law reform, local and national environmental issues and against war - and she stayed on course when others embraced New Labour.

Some people thought she sounded posh, but she was proud to be a working-class East Ender. Her socialism was rooted in her East End childhood. Going to school she would "walk past men lining up for work in the docks". She never forgot the sight of grown men crying because they couldn't feed their

families. Most of her uncles were dockers too.

Her school was in Cable Street, site of the famous battle with Oswald Mosley's British fascists. Mosley's mob would stand at Aldgate East station, scaring her Jewish piano teacher so much that lessons ceased. She would argue and campaign against racism all her life.

Aged 16 when war broke out, Joan decided to train as a nurse. Wages and conditions were dreadful and food rationing didn't help. Her meal during night shift would often be a cup of tea, bread and margarine. Working and living through the Blitz was not easy.

Her family were bombed out of Wapping, losing everything. An aunt and baby cousin were killed. During the war she nursed wounded soldiers, victims of the Blitz and later on, prisoners from Japanese war camps. Several school friends died.

This did not make her a pacifist but she developed a hatred of militarism and the glorification of war, so all the recent parades alarmed her. Britain is going back, she said,

to the "send a gun boat" philosophy.

After 1945 she worked as a community nurse in the East End where she was shocked by the poverty she encountered. "We never had much but what I saw was unbelievable ... people sleeping on the floor for lack of furniture ... children with rickets ... rampant TB".

She would recall that when the NHS was set up people were crying with joy at the thought of getting false teeth, glasses and good, free medical treatment. Tuberculosis was rife at that time and Joan also contracted it in 1945.

All her life our mum cared for others, becoming active against the war in Vietnam and against apartheid. She was a wise counsellor and friend not only to us, but to many other young people. When Labour members attacked us Young Socialists, claiming we would "grow out of our idealism", Joan would say "well I haven't and I won't".

She turned down the offer to stand as a local councillor to fulfil Labour's unofficial "women's

quota" - "what's that got to do with equality?"

In the 1970s, local building workers made her an honorary union member for handing over a share of her wages to their strike fund every week.

She was a steward for the Cohse union (which alas never stopped her doing unpaid overtime at the hospital) and defended the right of health workers to strike (as "no health worker would ever let patients suffer").

In the 1980s and 1990s, despite ailing health she stayed politically active and would often say "without the comrades I would despair of the future". She utterly despised the careerists and yes-men and women of New Labour, calling them "mealy-mouthed apologists driven by delusions of grandeur. If only the working class had leaders who stood up for them like Thatcher did for her class".

Joan had been ill for so long with lung disease, we couldn't imagine she would then get cancer. She bore it with typical humour and spoke to

every health worker she met about privatisation of the NHS and how they were going to fight it.

She told her GP she'd considered naming her tumour after Tony Blair or maybe David Cameron. This dilemma was solved when Scottish socialist Tommy Sheridan was sent down. She had spoken alongside him at a meeting in Stevenage and was sickened by press hypocrisy. Her tumour was dubbed Murdoch instead.

Our mum won't go down in history, but she inspired us to fight for a better future and care for others. The day before she died she was still making us laugh. Joan saw the birth of the welfare state and lived long enough to see New Labour start its demolition and Cameron trying to see it through.

So my life as a carer ended when my mother died, though my resolve to do something about the rights of carers is greater than ever. Joan told us not to mourn her. I will celebrate her example - there will be a petition against NHS privatisation at her funeral.

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Yorkshire	2,900	1,791	■	■	■	■	■
East Midlands	1,550	860	■	■	■	■	■
North West	1,200	624	■	■	■	■	■
West Midlands	2,100	951	■	■	■	■	■
South East	1,000	413	■	■	■	■	■
Eastern	1,200	476	■	■	■	■	■
South West	1,400	549	■	■	■	■	■
Southern	1,200	444	■	■	■	■	■
London	6,100	1,923	■	■	■	■	■
Northern	600	112	■	■	■	■	■
England & Wales	3,450	2,321	■	■	■	■	■
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>25,000</b>	<b>12,157</b>	■	■	■	■	■