Film review
Sylvia Pankhurst: Everything is possible

Indianna Purcell

World write, an ‘education charity dedicated to global equality’, has produced a new documentary based on the work of the tireless, three-time suffragette, Sylvia Pankhurst, Britain, human rights campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst (1862-1960). Over ten years in the making, it re- searched and made an informative, entertaining film: ‘Sylvia Pankhurst: Everything is Possible’.

It draws on exclusive interviews, involving both Pankhurst’s son Richard, authentic artefacts and parliamentary documents to trace this prominent socialist’s major 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, both socialist, worked hard 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 held memberships 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 on women’s rights, she left the Pankhurst family-founded East London federation of Suffragettes.

Although the federation was initially a direct family affair, 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 tearooms, a free clinic and a nursery.

As Mary Davis, author of Sylvia Pankhurst strongly denounced the war. She had disagreements with other workers’ 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’ Revolutionary Federation. Sylvia Pankhurst’s involvement in the three major political struggles of the time – the struggle for socialism, the women’s struggle and the Irish struggle for independence – brought her great notoriety among prominent politicians.

Her attempt to build a mass movement of people fighting on behalf of – and more importantly with – the movement 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 – opposed these efforts, Sylvia was unhesitant. She was a steward for the Cohese Workers’ Socialist Federation.

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