

working class, a theme that would become centrally important in Sylvia's American lectures.

### WORKING WOMEN AND THE VOTE

#### *English women workers and the vote*

Sylvia was far from being the only women's suffrage campaigner who was articulating a socialist argument for women's political enfranchisement. However, socialist advocates were generally predisposed to support adult suffrage, which demanded an abolition both of the property qualification required for the franchise and the sex disqualification from it. Women's suffrage 'as it is or may be granted to men, which the WSPU campaigned for, implicitly did not challenge the property qualification, though this position did win the support of some socialists on the grounds of expediency, either believing that women's suffrage would be a step towards adult suffrage, or fearing that in practice adult suffrage would see the women's claim jettisoned once again. However, as the WSPU abandoned its roots in the socialist and labour movements, the foremost socialist advocates were increasingly found outside its ranks. Two of the most prominent socialist WSPU members, Charlotte Despard and Dora Montefiore, left the organisation in 1907.

In the summer of 1907, Sylvia had set off from her home in London and travelled northwards, stopping in towns where she would stay with local people. She spent her time painting women in their workplaces and interviewing them about their work, with the intention of producing 'a book dealing with the work of women in a large number of trades', accompanied by her own illustrations.<sup>131</sup> The planned book was never completed, but Sylvia did publish extracts as an article titled 'Women Workers of England' along with her illustrations in *The London Magazine* in 1908. She repeatedly demonstrated that women workers were paid less than their male counterparts. Thus, her painting of the bankworkers pushing the tubs of coal at a Wigan colliery was accompanied by the observation that: 'A bankswoman earns from 1s. 10d. to 2s. 4d., whilst a bankman, doing exactly the same work, gets from 4s. 9d. to 5s. a day.'<sup>132</sup>

Sylvia's decision to explore women's working conditions in 1907 can be seen as an expression of her uneasiness with WSPU policy at this time. She would later recall her dismay at her tour being interrupted by communications from her mother and sister, variously instructing her

to suspend her own work to participate in WSPU campaigns during by-elections and justifying their transformation of the WSPU into an autocracy, which latter development prompted Despard's departure and her formation of a new militant suffrage organisation, the Women's Freedom League. Sylvia was in disagreement with the WSPU leadership in both these areas.

The WSPU's policy of campaigning to 'Keep the Liberal Out' in by-elections was presented by the leadership as an effective means of exerting pressure on the governing party. However, it could also be seen to advocate voting for the government's strongest electoral challenger, the Conservative Party. The insistence upon the WSPU's 'non-party', but anti-government, stance marked a break with the labour and socialist movement origins of the organisation. It swiftly developed into explicit hostility towards the Labour Party for the support it gave to progressive measures introduced by the Liberals, particularly around welfare and Home Rule for Ireland, while, conversely, implied praise for the reactionary opposition of the Conservatives to the government's entire programme. Meanwhile, with the dissolution of the WSPU's democratic constitution, the organisation redefined itself as a 'women's army' in which policy was dictated by the leaders, whom the rank and file were encouraged to follow unquestioningly. The mission was redefined as a spiritual crusade that transcended class boundaries, though in practice it represented a capitulation to contemporary social divisions, as middle-class women were cast as saviours acting on behalf of a much greater number of poorer women.<sup>133</sup> Thus, in 1908, leading WSPU member Emmeline Pethick Lawrence appealed 'to the strong to come forward now and take upon their shoulders the burden of the weak. It is not the toiling mother, the sweated worker, the deserted wife, the worsted in life, who can bear the strain and stress of the battle we are fighting for women's deliverance to-day.'<sup>134</sup>

Working-class women were thus reduced to a series of archetypal and helpless victims whose salvation would be delivered through the efforts of middle-class women who were assumed to be the movement's natural leaders. This was evidently the message that the WSPU expected to be articulated before American audiences, as Emmeline Pankhurst's own speeches demonstrated; in her farewell address in New York at the end of her 1909 tour Emmeline proclaimed: 'We have broken down class distinctions' before explaining that it was 'the privileged women, the honoured women ... who have never had to face the struggle for