

is she in?' I felt just a shade of indignation at the line he was taking. I felt my cheeks grow hot, and my voice sounded so. He answered in quite a sad changed voice 'She's the slave of a slave' and after that we got on better.¹⁴⁴

There were, nevertheless, limitations attached to speaking about English working conditions in America, as Sylvia would soon discover. Elite American audiences might concede that regrettable conditions existed in the 'old country', maintaining that these were the problems of backwardness and thus not of modern America. If sweated women's labour was acknowledged, it was dismissed as marginal to American capitalism. As Sylvia complains in this book: 'one is frequently told that over work, under pay, and bad conditions of employment amongst women are confined to the foreign immigrants, and that the American woman does not need to work in a factory, and is always well paid and well cared for' (p. 75). This narrative implicitly threatened arguments for women's suffrage, like those advanced by Sylvia, that women needed political representation as a means of overcoming their vulnerability to greater exploitation. For some commentators in America, such problems would be solved not by women's democratic participation but rather by unimpeded capitalism.

Countering this argument is one of the central themes of Sylvia's book. On arriving in a new town, Sylvia insisted on viewing workplaces where women were employed, making detailed observations of the ratio of male to female workers, the differentiation in their pay and treatment, as well as the ethnic composition of the workforce; she also read reports on women's labour, such as Ruby Stewart's study, *Women's Wages in Milwaukee* (1911). Alongside examples from England, Sylvia began to cite examples from her American research in her lectures, which she would later record in an expanded form in this book. Sylvia's research showed that far from women's low-paid work in factories existing as an aberration, this kind of work was becoming increasingly important as a result of unequal pay which ensured that, as she told her audience in Fargo in 1912, 'the women will force the men out [of employment]' because employers could pay them less for the same work.¹⁴⁵ Unregulated capitalism, then, would result in more not less of women's sweated labour and this was increasingly the case in modern America. At the Women's City Club in Missouri, Sylvia angrily confronted the complacency and, she implied, sense of racial superiority that characterised those who praised American working conditions as she

created something of a sensation by telling her hearers that they were no further advanced than the Chinese and the Turks whom they held in contempt. 'You are,' said Miss Pankhurst, 'the most backward nation in the Western world, and here in Missouri you have the most backward State.' She cited cases to prove her statement and showed that the evils resulting from low wages and the unjust economic conditions under which women lived in that city were worse than existed elsewhere.¹⁴⁶

In March 1911, she told reporters in Detroit: 'Another thing that annoys me terribly is to hear about the wonderfully good conditions existing in this country for women. Why, I never saw anything worse in London than the way the garment workers in Chicago suffered. Women need the vote badly in this country.'¹⁴⁷ The example of the Chicago garment workers is instructive, and points to the turbulent atmosphere in which Sylvia undertook her tours.

The uprising of working women in America

Sylvia arrived in America in 1911 in the midst of a huge wave of working-class militancy that was led by working women. The movement had emerged in November 1909 from strikes of garment workers, most of whom were women from immigrant backgrounds, in two shirtwaist factories in New York City. Frustrated with the passive response from the trade union leadership, they called for a general strike of the city's garment workers which captured the mood in the sweatshops and fundamentally changed the pace of the struggle: the 'uprising of the 20,000,' as it became known, had begun. The uprising inspired a new movement, as low-paid women in city after city voted to strike, downed tools and picketed their sweatshops.

The strike wave erupted in the garment factories of Chicago on 23 September 1910, four months before Sylvia arrived in the city, at the Hart, Schaffner and Marx clothing factory after a cut in women workers' piece rates was enforced. It was clear this was a final hardship that caused mounting tension to snap – the women objected to the way they were treated every day in the factory, from 'the petty tyranny' of the foreman who was paid extra if he could drive his workforce to produce over a certain amount; the 'abusive and insulting language ... frequently used by those in authority in the shops,' and the punitive system of fines, for