

such misdemeanours as a 'liberal use of soap in washing hands', which reduced their paltry wages still further.¹⁴⁸ The strikers turned for help to the United Garment Workers Union but found this union uninterested in organising low-paid, immigrant women workers and pessimistic about their prospects of success, and so the women approached and won the support of the Chicago Federation of Labour and the Chicago Women's Trade Union League (WTLU). By the time Sylvia arrived in Chicago, the strike was in its last, bitter stages. The United Garment Workers Union had negotiated over the heads of the strikers themselves for the workers at the Hart, Schaffner and Marx factory to return to work on 14 January, as arbitration had commenced. This, however, left 30,000 garment workers from other shops who had joined the strike and were still picketing. (Two weeks later, the United Garment Workers' leader suddenly called off the strike, leaving these workers without an agreement and subject to victimisation by furious employers.)



5. Sylvia Pankhurst (left, numbered 7) looks into a prison cell at Harrison Street, Chicago on 21 January 1911. The women beside her are (from left to right) Elizabeth Belmont, the assistant police matron, Olive Sullivan, from the Women's Trade Union League, and Zelle Emerson, a Settlement worker who played a crucial role in the strike of garment workers in the city. Emerson would later help Sylvia construct the East London Federation of Suffragettes. (Courtesy of the Chicago History Museum)

On 21 January 1911, Zelle Emerson and Olive Sullivan, two women from the Chicago WTLU, took Sylvia to visit the Harrison Street Gaol and police courts to convey just how difficult the garment workers' struggle had been.¹⁴⁹ Upton Sinclair's sensational novel *The Jungle*, published five years earlier, had exposed the collusion in Chicago between police, politicians, employers and organised crime, which enabled an elite few to make huge profits out of sweating immigrant labourers. Any resistance to that was met with vicious and organised brutality, as the garment workers soon discovered. Male and female strikers were attacked and beaten on the picket lines by thugs hired by the employers as well as by the police. Pickets were arrested and imprisoned, and two strikers were shot dead by the police in the course of the strike.¹⁵⁰ Harrison Street left Sylvia with an enduring sense of horror (see Chapter 4, pp. 98–99). After seeing where the pickets had been incarcerated, Sylvia wrote an impassioned denunciation of the Harrison Street cells, which was published in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*:

I heard of some of the women and girls who had been picketing in the garment workers' strike, as I am told in a perfectly legal way, who had been arrested and thrust either into these police court cells or into the annex, in both of which the risk of contamination at all times is exceedingly great. Happily, their trade union organizations have been able to come to their aid and bail them out within a short time, but it must be remembered that the people being on strike were practically penniless and had no money of their own, and therefore had others not come to their assistance they would have been obliged to continue suffering this terrible form of confinement.¹⁵¹

This article was considered significant enough for the Chicago WTLU's official report into the strike to include thanks to Sylvia because her 'telling description of the Harrison Police Station, where many of the young girl strikers were sent when arrested for picketing, was a challenge to the social conscience, as well as an indictment of the industrial conditions of Chicago'.¹⁵²

Sylvia's article acknowledged the support that the striking garment workers received and Zelle Emerson was well-placed to describe the scale of the solidarity efforts. A member of the Chicago WTLU, Emerson had been in charge of a restaurant to feed strikers and their families on Noble Street, she was the 'Chairman' of the Rent Committee and, with