

for the vote or the employment of the vote. Instead, Sylvia articulates here her view of democracy as a mechanism for the representation of class feeling.

Capital and labour

Towards the end of her lecture tour in 1912, Sylvia joined up again with the WPU which had first welcomed her to New York the year before. The WPU were running a campaign in New York State's Mohawk Valley to galvanise popular support for a state vote on women's suffrage and Sylvia participated in their lecture circuit. Her speeches now reflected upon the accumulation of experiences and research that she had gained in the course of her tours. America, she concluded, was afflicted by 'graft and commercialism'.¹⁶⁴ 'Graft' – Sylvia chose the American term – referred to the corruption of politics which she had witnessed, a theme she returned to on multiple occasions during her 1912 tour. Arriving in Milwaukee at the end of January 1912, she complained of its pervasiveness in American politics: 'While riding in a train in New York I overheard a candidate for the legislature say that when he failed to win his hearers by a speech he took them into a saloon and gave them beer. The law would not permit anyone to talk like that at home.'¹⁶⁵

Although she did not deny corruption in British politics, she felt that it was far more openly accepted as a facet of political life in America. Moreover, she saw this as a threat to winning popular support for women's suffrage since 'the average American has much less regard for government, a lower ideal of it, than the Englishman'.¹⁶⁶ It was not therefore that modern American capitalism had made women's suffrage obsolete, in fact the capitalist belief in the supremacy of wealth was undermining what existed of democratic political life and thus its triumph over women's suffrage would signal women's further subordination and exploitation.

Sylvia also objected to 'commercialism ... going ahead of that great other side – conservation of human life'.¹⁶⁷ The most grotesque example of this was the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on New York's Lower East Side on 25 March 1911. The factory occupied the top floors of the building, too high for the fire department's ladders. The fire escape was wholly inadequate and swiftly became blocked and then collapsed when the desperate workers tried to use it for escape. One of the doors on the factory floor was locked; though against regulations, the company

owners did it anyway – they did not want their employees stealing from them. The fire spread quickly through the garment factory and 146 workers, most of them women, and most from immigrant backgrounds, were killed. Some were burnt to death in the factory, others in desperation leapt from the windows and were killed on impact with the pavement below.¹⁶⁸ In the Preface to this book, Sylvia recalls her attendance at the huge funeral for the victims in New York. In the Mohawk Valley, towards the end of her 1912 tour, Sylvia found herself speaking on the same platforms as Rose Schneiderman, a trade union organiser and garment worker herself who, in the aftermath of the fire, delivered a powerful speech denouncing the priorities of modern America where '[t]he life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred'.¹⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, Schneiderman and Sylvia would have discussed the fire which they both highlighted in their speeches as demonstrating the need for working women's political emancipation. What happened at the Triangle factory was not because there were no safety regulations, but because women lacked power. As Sylvia explained: 'Laws have been passed affecting working conditions and supposedly for the safeguarding of the employed, but they are not enforced. The Triangle fire in New York was but one sad example.'¹⁷⁰

Eighteen months before the fire, the strike of workers at the Triangle and another nearby garment factory had begun the uprising of the 20,000. The Triangle bosses had been among the most intransigent of all; their strikers returned to work with small wage rises but without the closed shop union policy they wanted. The balance of power at the Triangle remained, essentially, the same as before. Sylvia argued that what was needed was for 'that great other side', the protection of humanity, to be reasserted and that women needed this as men did: 'When we think of capital and labour ... we think of armies of workmen. It does not strike us that women, too, are working'.¹⁷¹ Moreover, like men, women needed more than trade unionism: they needed protective legislation to be enforced, which meant employing female factory inspectors, who could 'get the confidence' of women workers, and granting women political power.

This, she concluded, was needed as much in America as it was in England. According to one report, Sylvia explained: 'She was beginning to learn that England was not the only place where things were not just as they ought to be. She had been told that America was the land