

the WSPU leadership's assertion of the primacy of the political struggle and often dismissive approach towards labour struggles by referring to a successful example of women's industrial action in Britain. This was almost certainly the strike of women working in the packing factories around Bernondsey in August 1911. At the time, Sylvia demonstrated her interest in the details of women's exploitation and their forms of resistance by interviewing three hundred of the strikers about their pay.⁴

Sylvia adopts the same interest in diligently listening to and recording the experiences of working women in this chapter; in fact, she does not even mention her own role as the speaker at the strikers' meeting. Sylvia's combination of empirical and observational detail recalls her 'working women of England' project of 1907, in which text and painting recorded the women's shared experiences of pay, conditions and labour, alongside their individual appearances, characters and relationships. In this chapter, Sylvia's description of an 18-year-old laundry worker is characteristic of her approach. 'She might have been anybody's daughter': Sylvia asserts the laundry worker's individual humanity and, with her artist's eye, captures in vivid detail the colours and textures of her hair, skin and clothes, before reciting the deadening timetable of work to which she is subjected. In the very fabric of Sylvia's writing, the realisation of individuality is integral to the revolt against collectivised exploitation, collapsing, at least in textual form, the WSPU's dichotomy of individual political rights and collective economic struggle.

At the meeting on 12 January, Sylvia told the strikers that 'she knew the conditions which brought about the strike and that it was justified', and this chapter certainly bears out her claim.⁵ She evidently listened intently to the laundry workers, her enumeration of the excessive hours worked closely correlates with the contemporary report of the strike provided by Mary Dreier.⁶ Using the laundry workers' testimony, Sylvia provides a graphic description of overheated, steam-filled workplaces, the lack of changing rooms and the abusive language foremen and employers used towards their workers.⁷

Sylvia's concern with racism as a mechanism for sowing divisions in the workforce and intensifying exploitation is expressed frequently in the chapter. Her insistence upon the large component of American women in the laundries echoes the speech she delivered at the strikers' meeting in which she stated that '[i]t was a common argument ... that low wages were due to the competition of foreign labor. But in the case of the laundries this did not hold'.⁸ As Sylvia states in the chapter, the

widespread presence of native-born workers undermined the racist and sexist myth that 'the American woman does not need to work in a factory, and is always well paid and well cared for'.⁹ Sylvia's approach blamed employers, and not foreign-born workers, for poor pay and conditions. She reinforces this point by recording the evidence of a (presumably American-born) laundry worker – that two Italian women are paid less than she is for the same work. The solution to these divisions is suggested towards the end of the chapter which describes a white American, a black American and an Italian-born worker united across racial boundaries in a collective struggle against the laundry bosses.

In the end, despite the State Board of Mediation and Arbitration's recommendation that the employers grant the strikers' demands on hours, pay, safety measures and union recognition, the strike was defeated on 31 January 1912. Only six laundries had recognised the union and conceded wage increases; the rest replaced the workers who had the audacity to strike with strikebreaking labour.¹⁰ Sylvia only records a moment in this month-long struggle before it was defeated, and it testifies to the courage of the strikers, and Sylvia's determination that their voices be heard.



A STRIKE OF LAUNDRY WORKERS IN NEW YORK

We went in from the frozen snow of the street, and a hot foetid breath met us. The dingy entrance passage was without furnishings, its walls were scarred, and its carpetless boards were darkened by long worn dirt. A group of poorly-clad men and women stood at the foot of the stairs, and around a door opening from the passage. We passed through them, and into a large room as dirty and dreary as the entrance. At either end was a drinking bar, and the smell of stale spirits filled the air. Cheap bent-wood chairs and small tables were huddled aimlessly together. Various red white and blue posters were hung up to announce forthcoming dances, for this was a New York 'Casino', or 'dance hall', which had been hired for the time being as the headquarters of the laundry workers, who were on strike.

Some twenty or thirty of the strikers were sitting here together. We asked one of them, a girl of 18, to tell us about the work.

She might have been anybody's daughter. Social distinctions had no place beside her. I saw, as I looked at her, a child in an English country