

## 5. A Socialist Administration The Milwaukee City Council

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

On 5 February 1912, after helping to establish the Votes for Women League of North Dakota in Fargo, Sylvia boarded a train for Minneapolis where she would change for another train to Madison, Wisconsin. It was late afternoon, 'the prettiest part of the day', and Sylvia, with an artist's palette in mind, watched the changing colour of the sky from 'pure and limpid blue pale grey and palest gold with the bright sun sinking lower and lower' to 'soft greenish blue with faint dull purple clouds closer to the horizon'. The shadows, 'far bluer than the sky', turned 'pale lilac' as the sun began to set upon a blanket of snow 'tinged with pinkish gold'. Woodland obscured the last rays as 'the bleakness of the night' descended and turned the trees 'all dead black'. It was only after the sunset, and once she had changed trains, that Sylvia was able to return to the main subject of her letter to Keir Hardie though 'not for long, she informed him, as she would arrive in Madison at 3 o'clock in the morning'.<sup>1</sup> She ended up writing over fifty pages more about her visit to Milwaukee, where she had left three days earlier, most of which would form the basis of this chapter, with the section on laundries being used in Chapter 2.

In 1910, the socialist Social Democratic Party triumphed in the elections to Milwaukee city and county offices, with Emil Seidel becoming the first socialist mayor of a major city in America. A committed socialist herself, Sylvia was interested in how a socialist administration operated in practice and in the course of sharing her observations with Keir Hardie – 'because I think you will be interested to hear what I thought about it and why' – she elaborated upon her own conception of socialism.<sup>2</sup> This chapter, which further develops the insights of her letter, constitute Sylvia's most extensive writing on socialism prior to her expulsion from the WSPU.

Sylvia first met Mayor Emil Seidel at Milwaukee's City Hall on 30 January immediately after the visit to the Milwaukee laundries with Miss Perdue and Miss Miller described in Chapter 2. Sylvia complained to

Keir Hardie that she felt inhibited by the presence of these two women in her interview with Seidel to whom she wanted to articulate her views on women's suffrage and socialism without allowing for 'a sensational story for the reporter lady [Perdue]'.<sup>3</sup> She was evidently acutely aware of the political sensitivities around her visit to Milwaukee as a representative of and participant in the women's suffrage movement, which organised women across political parties. Moreover, although Sylvia's sympathies were with the socialists, she felt Seidel's approach to the question of women's suffrage was lukewarm whilst among his rivals, who had united to challenge the socialists at the upcoming election, was Robert La Follette, who had declared his support for women's suffrage and whose wife Belle and daughter Fola were active suffragists. Sylvia, however, felt that La Follette's participation in the alliance against the socialists ran counter to his progressive political stance, observing to Hardie: 'It appears to me that the present Socialist Council ought to be considered ideal from the La Follette point of view'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Sylvia's own criticisms of the socialist administration sought after greater co-operation with and understanding between the suffragists and the socialists.

A friendly but critical tone informs Sylvia's treatment of the Milwaukee socialist administration in this chapter. She returned to City Hall the morning after her first visit, this time, she told Hardie, 'in company with two socialist ladies' – probably a reference to Crystal Eastman, then helping to organise the Wisconsin suffrage campaign, and Elsie Cole Phillips, from the Milwaukee Child Welfare Commission, as Sylvia was recorded as their guest at noon on the same day.<sup>5</sup> Her experiences here form the main part of this chapter, as she describes her encounters with the various departments in City Hall and the Bureau of Efficiency and Economy established by the socialists. Sylvia was impressed by the rigour displayed by the Bureau, telling one interviewer that '[t]he charts and exhibits [at the Bureau] showed the reduction of city governing to an exact science – a statement that nevertheless also indicates the misgivings she expresses in this chapter'.<sup>6</sup> Throughout her study of Milwaukee's administration, from her visit to the site of the House of Correction farm to her diligent reading of the Bureau's bulletins cited extensively in this chapter, Sylvia outlines three major concerns. Firstly, she argues that the emphasis on efficiency was a 'top down' approach that failed to encompass working people as participants in the socialist project. Secondly, she observes that women's needs were often overlooked. Thirdly, she notes that necessary, long-term radical solutions were being compromised