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Women Pioneers

Albert Meltzer

1991

Middle class feminists of our time have referred to the revolutionary movement before them as “male dominated”. Conventional history always ignores workers in general and women in particular unless they are remarkable, or come into a particular historical recognition (e.g. a queen). There were fewer women at mass meetings in the history of modern anarchism because of various social inhibitions strongest in the working class but the generalisation taken from this ignores those who were active.

For Instance, Keir Hardie, socialist and suffragist pioneer and founder of the Independent Labour Party, was invited to speak at a meeting of the Clarion League (pro-WWI). He was shocked to find it was held in a pub — with ladies present! — and would not go in. Invited to debate in an Anarchist meeting in London’s East End, he did go in, it having then been carefully explained to him that pub halls were the only place available. When he went in he found — horror of horrors — women smoking! He fled thinking he was in a brothel. But he later apologised, having been told they were Russian ladies (who could smoke and remain respectable).

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Even as late as 1937, the Anarcho-Syndicalist Union booked a basement hall in Howland Street (London W.1), then a fairly slummy district. The landlady, of an older generation, had no objections to the politics (if she understood them) providing there was “no rowdyism”. At the first meeting, at which Capt J.R. White was to speak, she burst in dramatically and protested vigorously (There are women amongst you! You can’t be up to any good!) and called the police. How with that attitude even at a meeting in one’s own hall, could working women, not sure of their rights, attend mass demonstrations?

The Suffragists, largely coming from upper and middle class backgrounds used to having and knowing rights, largely shattered this conception, but it still lingered until WWII.

In the USA one of the foremost women fighters was ‘Mother Jones’, a miners’ leader, who incidentally was opposed to Suffragism. (“I’ve raised hell all over the west without a vote, and I wouldn’t give a damn if I had one or not”, she said — though many women, opposed to parliamentarism, saw the vote as a symbol). She also criticized as middle-class the demand for job equality, saying that so far as working woman were concerned it meant having two jobs, and being exploited twice, and that working people’s pay would come down or prices double once it was known there were two gainfully employed members per household. However she fought vigorously for miners’ conditions, facing lynch mobs with an army of women with brooms.

Another great fighter was Lucy Parsons. She was of mixed Negro and Indian blood, but concealed it in her lifetime because Albert Parsons would have been charged with ‘miscenegation’ in the South, and in her work in the North she did not regard it as important. For years after Albert Parsons was judicially murdered (Chicago Martyrs, 1886) until she was old, impoverished and blind (when the CP manipulated her in the struggle for union rights) she carried on Anarchist propaganda in her own fight. She opposed vigilante and lynch squads against work-

ers with the counter-cry for the have-nots to arm. Like Mother Jones, she was a co-founder of the IWW.

The Federal police were so frightened of her that even when she was on her deathbed, they raided her apartment as she lay there barely cold, and seized every document in the place. Albert Parsons had then been dead seventy years, and long since rehabilitated by Governor Altgeld. They were after Lucy, who had been a thorn in their flesh for years. Even in death they feared her.

Another pioneer was Louise Michel, the French Anarchist who organised bread riots in France, organised a woman’s militia in the French Commune, was deported to New Caledonia afterwards (where as a prisoner she taught the Kanakas). She lived for years in London (where she founded a free school and far ahead of her time established squatting) before being amnestied and returning to France to found an Anarchist newspaper, “Le Libertaire”. She ran an International School in Soho, and the International Club (which ultimately became the Communist Club, before the establishment of the CP). This club had its own theatre group which — it may be of passing interest to note — introduced Elsa Lanchester (daughter of a Suffragist well known in her day) and her later husband Charles Laughton, to the acting profession.