

The Suffragettes

Errico Malatesta

1913

I went to the funerals of Emily Davison, “dead for the cause of women,” as the funeral banners said — and I came back sad and moved.

The cause of women! For it believed to be fighting the poor martyr who, leaving the comforts of a privileged position, sacrificing her favorite studies and exercises, devoted her whole self to the struggle for the conquest of the vote for women. She had always persisted for years, always full of audacity and initiative, in the guerrillas made by the suffragettes in order to draw the public’s attention to their claims and force the parliament to respond to them; she had been repeatedly imprisoned, she had gone on hunger strike, she had been subjected to the torture of forced feeding and she had once got seriously injured in a stubborn suicide attempt, carried out because she thought “a great tragedy was needed to save her fellow prisoner women from torture”; finally she left life in a daring act of propaganda, recommending, at the moment of her death, to her companions to persevere in the struggle.

And like Emily Davison, all those heroic women believe to be fighting for the cause of women, all those generous women, young and old, who dauntlessly expose themselves to the laughter of fools, to the jokes and projectiles of the gilded scum, encouraged and supported by the police, to the persecutions and torments inflicted on them by hypocritical and coward rulers, who do not dare to let them die of starvation, but who torture them to the point of endangering their lives and ruining their health forever.

They believe they are fighting for the cause of women, because, in their opinion, the conquest of the vote would free the slave women of the workshop who get skinny with miserable wages, the suffering mothers who cannot feed their children, the oppressed wives who suffer the violence of the brutal male, the wretches who prostitute themselves by giving themselves to passers-by for a piece of bread, or by uniting in marriage without love to the man who can keep them — and give all of them economic independence and the dignity of a free person.

And instead they open the way for the politicking women who are on the prowl to take advantage of their sacrifices and deceive women voters as “simple men”.

Oh, sad human tragedy! Women enter history... they enter it through the same tortuous path, full of illusions and traps, that men are going through.

We cannot be with them. Their demand, which the authoritarian parties of all kinds have nothing to oppose, except brute force, cannot resist the criticism of anarchists.

They expect the emancipation of their sex from the exercise of the right to vote, when the same right has been and is palpably powerless to emancipate the sex that already has it.

They proclaim that women do not owe obedience to the laws made by men — and then they want the right to make, together with men, laws that will naturally be imposed even on those who have not contributed to make them.

But if what the suffragettes want, that is, the right to contribute to the election of legislators, is certainly useless and bad, on the other hand the movement they carry out is a beautiful example of will and sacrifice and proves how often the method has more importance than the goal.

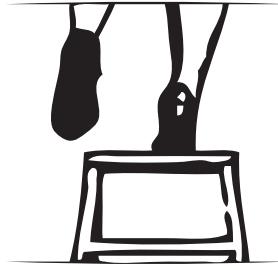
By having resorted to direct action and illegal means, the suffragettes were able in a short time to make the female vote a throbbing issue that no English government can ignore and that will soon have to be resolved in their favor: they managed to put the government of a powerful empire in the most ridiculous position, they stripped the mask of hypocrisy from the *liberals* and the parliamentary *labourists*, they mocked and trampled on the laws, they showed how, in the service of an idea, one can violate the right of property without exposing themselves to the suspicion of sordid motives. Although they are not revolutionary in the full sense of the word, they render a remarkable service to the cause of revolution, as they give the workers an example of audacity that will not be lost.

Certainly, it is painful to see so much enthusiasm, so much tenacity, so much activity wasted for a cause as bad as that of the right to vote, when one thinks that these energies would make an immense step towards the cause of human emancipation if they were taken among the working women in order to encourage and support them in the direct struggle against exploitation and oppression. But how can we blame them for this error, they who are only now entering into public life, when into the same error still fall the great majority of men, who for more than a century have experienced the inanity of suffrage, either universal or restricted?

Let us therefore criticize the illusion of these women in order to try to induce them to fight for a better cause, or so that, in any case, they can remember and amend themselves on the inevitable day of disappointments and betrayals.

But let us honor their dedication and their courage, and let us learn from them the faith, which is made of confident will and ardent hope, the faith without which great victories cannot be achieved.

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