

A little summarizing from writings by [John Simkin](mailto:john@spartacus-educational.com) (john@spartacus-educational.com) © September 1997 (updated April 2017).

The British suffragette movement

Emmeline Pankhurst, the eldest daughter of ten children of **Robert Goulden** and Sophia Crane Gouldon, was born in Manchester on 15th July, 1858. Her father came from a family with radical political beliefs. Emmeline's grandfather had been one of the crowd at the Peterloo Massacre in 1819 took part in the campaigns against slavery and the Corn Laws. The eldest daughter in a family of ten children, Emmeline was expected to look after her younger brothers and sisters. (...)

Robert Gouldon was the successful owner of a cotton-printing company at Seedley. He had conventional ideas about education. (...) Robert Goulden was a friend of **John Stuart Mill** and supported his campaign to get women the vote. These views were communicated to his children and during the 1868 General Election, Emmeline and her younger sister, Mary, took part in a feminist demonstration. According to Martin Pugh, the author of *The Pankhursts* (2001), she attended her first suffrage meeting in 1872, hosted by veteran campaigner, Lydia Becker. Emmeline Pankhurst was an impressive orator. After a short spell at a local school, Emmeline was sent to École Normale Supérieure, a finishing school in Paris in 1873. (...)

Emmeline Pankhurst decided to leave the Labour Party and decided to establish the **Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)**. Emmeline stated that the main aim of the organisation was to recruit working class women into the struggle for the vote. Some early members included Christabel Pankhurst, Sylvia Pankhurst, Adela Pankhurst, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, Marion Wallace-Dunlop, Elizabeth Robins. (...)

The main objective was to gain, not universal suffrage, the vote for all women and men over a certain age, but votes for women, "on the same basis as men." This meant winning the vote not for all women but for only the small stratum of women who could meet the property qualification. (...) The work of the Women's Social and Political Union was begun by Mrs. Pankhurst in Manchester, and by a group of women in London who had revolted against the inertia and conventionalism. (...)

By 1905 the media had lost interest in the struggle for women's rights. Newspapers rarely reported meetings and usually refused to publish articles and letters written by supporters of women's suffrage. In 1905 the WSPU decided to use different methods to obtain the publicity they thought would be needed in order to obtain the vote. (...)

On **13th October 1905**, **Christabel Pankhurst** and **Annie Kenney** attended a meeting in London to hear Sir Edward Grey, a minister in the British government. When Grey was talking, the two women constantly shouted out, "Will the Liberal Government give votes to women?" When the women refused to stop shouting the police were called to evict them from the meeting. Pankhurst and Kenney refused to leave and during the struggle a policeman claimed the two women kicked and spat at him. Pankhurst and Kenney were both arrested.

Christabel Pankhurst was charged with assaulting the police and Annie Kenney with obstruction. They were both found guilty. Pankhurst was fined ten shillings or a jail sentence of one week. Kenney was fined five shillings, with an alternative of three days in prison. When the women refused to pay the fine they were sent to prison. The case shocked the nation. For the first time in Britain women had used violence in an attempt to win the vote. In February, 1908, Emmeline Pankhurst was arrested for her political activities and was sentenced to six weeks in prison.

Hunger Strikes

On 25th June 1909, **Marion Wallace-Dunlop** was found guilty of wilful damage and when she refused to pay a fine she was sent to prison for a month. Wallace-Dunlop refused to eat for several days. Afraid that she might die and become a martyr, it was decided to release her. (...)

On 22nd September 1909 Charlotte Marsh, Laura Ainsworth and Mary Leigh were arrested while disrupting a public meeting being held by Herbert Asquith. Marsh, Ainsworth and Leigh were all sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment. They immediately decided to go on hunger-strike, a strategy developed by Marion Wallace-Dunlop a few weeks earlier. (...) Hunger-strikes now became the accepted strategy of the WSPU. In one eighteen month period, Emmeline Pankhurst endured ten hunger-strikes.

Militant Campaign

In early 1912 the WSPU organised a new campaign that involved the large-scale **smashing of shop-windows**. Frederick Pethick-Lawrence and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence both disagreed with this strategy but Christabel Pankhurst ignored their objections. As soon as this wholesale smashing of shop windows began, the government ordered the arrest of the leaders of the WSPU. Christabel escaped to France but Frederick and Emmeline were arrested, tried and sentenced to nine months imprisonment. They were also successfully sued for the cost of the damage caused by the WSPU. (...)

Emmeline Pankhurst gave permission for her daughter, **Christabel Pankhurst**, to launch a secret **arson campaign**. She knew that she was likely to be arrested and so she decided to move to Paris. In **July 1912**, Christabel Pankhurst began organizing a secret arson campaign. Attempts were made by suffragettes to burn down the houses of two members of the government who opposed women having the vote. These attempts failed but soon afterwards, a house being built for David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was badly damaged by suffragettes. One of the first arsonists was **Mary Richardson**. She later recalled the first time she set fire to a building.

In 1913 the WSPU arson campaign escalated and railway stations, cricket pavilions, racecourse stands and golf clubhouses being set on fire. Slogans in favour of women's suffrage were cut and burned into the turf. Suffragettes also cut telephone wires and destroyed letters by pouring chemicals into post boxes. The women responsible were often caught and once in prison they went on hunger-strike. Determined to avoid these women becoming martyrs, the government introduced the Prisoner's Temporary Discharge of Ill Health Act. Suffragettes were now allowed to go on hunger strike but as soon as they became ill they were released. Once the women had recovered, the police re-arrested them and returned them to prison where they completed their sentences. This successful means of dealing with hunger strikes became known as the Cat and Mouse Act. (...)

Lilian Lenton was another member of the WSPU who played an important role in the arson campaign. Along with Olive Wharry she embarked on a series of terrorist acts. They were arrested on 19th February 1913, soon after setting fire to the tea pavilion in Kew Gardens. While in custody, Lenton went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed. She was quickly released from prison when she became seriously ill after food entered her lungs. (...)

Keir Hardie, the Labour MP, protested against the idea of **force-feeding** in the House of Commons. The authorities believed that force-feeding would act as a deterrent as well as a punishment. This was a serious miscalculation and in many ways it had the opposite effect. Militant members of the

WSPU now had beliefs as strong as any religion and now they could argue that women were actually being tortured for their faith

Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, one of the early hunger-strikers pointed out that if the government was so naive as to think "the nasal tube or the stomach pump, the steel gag, the punishment cell, handcuffs and the straight jacket would break the spirit of women who were determined to win the enfranchisement of their sex, they were again woefully misled". The WSPU did get the support of two prominent journalists, Henry N. Brailsford and Henry Nevinson, who both resigned from The Daily News in protest against its refusal to condemn forcible feeding. (...)

Mary Leigh and Emily Wilding Davison were caught throwing stones at a car taking David Lloyd George to a meeting in Newcastle. The women were found guilty and sentenced to one month's hard labour at Strangeways Prison. The women went on hunger strike but once again the prison authorities decided to force-feed the women. Christabel Pankhurst made it clear that the WSPU would not change their tactics and members in prison would continue to go on hunger-strike. (...)

Emmeline Pankhurst's sister, Mary Clarke, was the organiser of the WSPU in Brighton. Clarke was arrested and sent to Holloway Prison, where she endured a hunger-strike and forced-feeding. She was released on 22nd December, 1910 but two days later Emmeline Pankhurst found her unconscious and she died soon afterwards as a result of a burst blood vessel on the brain. It has been claimed that Clarke was the first of several suffragettes, probably died as a result of being forced fed in prison.

Cat and Mouse Act

In January 1913, Emmeline Pankhurst made a speech where she stated that it was now clear that Herbert Asquith had no intention to introduce legislation that would give women the vote. She now declared war on the government and took full responsibility for all acts of militancy.

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After going nine days without eating, they released Emmeline Pankhurst for fifteen days so she could recover her health. On 26th May, 1913, when Emmeline Pankhurst attempted to attend a meeting, she was arrested and returned to prison. (...)

Emily Davison joined the Women's Social and Political Union in 1906. She took part in Arson campaign. In 1913 she was convinced that women would not win the vote until the suffragette movement had a martyr. Emily took the decision to draw attention to the suffragette campaign by jumping down an iron staircase. Emily landed on wire-netting, 30 feet below. This prevented her death but she suffered severe spinal injuries.

Once she had recovered her health, Emily Davison began making plans to commit an act that would give the movement maximum publicity. On 8th June, 1913, she attended the most important race of the year, the Derby (Empson Derby) with Mary Richardson. Davison ran out on the course and

attempted to grab the bridle of Anmer, a horse owned by King George V. The horse hit Emily and the impact fractured her skull and she died on 8th June without regaining consciousness.

Women and the First World War

On **4th August, 1914**, Britain declared war on Germany (**WWI**). The leadership of the WSPU began negotiating with the British government. On the 10th August the government announced it was releasing all suffragettes from prison. In return, the WSPU agreed to end their militant activities and help the war effort. The Women's Freedom League disagreed and continued with its campaign for the vote.

Some leaders of the WSPU such as Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter, Christabel Pankhurst, played an important role as speakers at meetings to recruit young men into the army. Others like Sylvia Pankhurst were opposed to the war and refused to carry out this role. Some members of the WSPU disagreed with the decision to call off militant activities. For example, Kitty Marion was so angry she went to the USA to help American women in their fight for the vote.

As men left jobs to fight overseas, they were replaced by women. Octavia Wilberforce and Louisa Martindale from Brighton worked as doctors treating wounded British soldiers. Margery Corbett Ashby was married with a young child and so was restricted in the role she could play in the war effort. However, she was active in Danehill where she ran a school for local children. Clementina Black and Hilda Martindale continued their work trying to protect women workers in London.

Women filled many jobs brought into existence by wartime needs. As a result the number of women employed increased from 3,224,600 in July, 1914 to 4,814,600 in January 1918. Nearly 200,000 women were employed in government departments. Half a million became clerical workers in private offices. Women worked as conductors on trams and buses. A quarter of a million worked on the land. The greatest increase of women workers was in engineering. Over 700,000 of these women worked in the highly dangerous munitions industry. Industries that had previously excluded women now welcomed them. There was a particular demand for women to do heavy work such as unloading coal, stoking furnaces and building ships.

1918 Qualification of Women Act

In January, 1917, the House of Commons began discussing the possibility of granting women the vote in parliamentary elections. Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister during the militant suffrage campaign, had always been totally against women having the vote. However, during the debate he confessed he had changed his mind and now supported the claims of the WSPU.

On 28th March, 1917, the House of Commons voted 341 to 62 that women over the age of 30 who were householders, the wives of householders, occupiers of property with an annual rent of £5 or graduates of British universities. MPs rejected the idea of granting the vote to women on the same terms as men. Soon afterwards Emmeline Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst established the The Women's Party.

After the passing of the Qualification of Women Act the first opportunity for women to vote was in the General Election in December, 1918.

1928 Equal Franchise Act

After the passing of the Qualification of Women Act in 1918 women had their first opportunity to vote in a General Election in December, 1918. Several of the women involved in the suffrage campaign stood for Parliament. (...)

In 1919 Parliament passed the Sex Disqualification Removal Act which made it illegal to exclude women from jobs because of their sex. Women could now become solicitors, barristers and magistrates. (...)

A bill was introduced in March 1928 to give women the vote on the same terms as men. There was little opposition in Parliament to the bill and it became law on **2nd July 1928**. As a result, all women **over the age of 21** could now vote in elections. Many of the women who had fought for this right were now dead including Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Barbara Bodichon, Emily Davies, Elizabeth Wolstenholme-Elmy, Constance Lytton and Emmeline Pankhurst.