

Radical Women of the IWW

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Donal Fallon profiles some of the women who played a large part in the illustrious history of the Industrial Workers of the World.

Women have been at the forefront of the IWW since its inception. The IWW was the first union of its kind to attempt to organise prostitutes in major US cities. While the percentage of female representatives at their inaugural convention (around 12 in total) may seem quite small, the issue of gender equality was always at the front of the organisations agenda. The women profiled here are just three of the famous female faces among the wobblies of the past. There are many others whose names remain unknown.

During one strike, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, female strikers carried homemade placards proclaiming “*we want bread and roses too!*” committed to improving not just the conditions of the working class in the work place, but indeed the general living conditions of working class people. During the strikes in Lawrence, local media reported that more female strikers than males were arrested by the local police force! Their crimes included, according to the police, “*intimidating strikebreakers.*”

There are countless other chapters to the history of women within the IWW, not least the Patterson Silk Strike of 1913 when around 25,000 striking silk workers managed to shut down 200 silk mills and dye houses in New Jersey for 5 months in 1913. The IWW’s attitude to the state is what sets it apart from many unions. Its bold mission statement stated that the working class and employing class held nothing in common, a philosophy it continued to work by through good times and bad. The women, and indeed men and children of the IWW are, I feel, best remembered in the lines of the classic IWW ballad Everett County Jail:

In the prison cell we sit
Are we broken hearted—nit.
We’re as happy and as cheerful as can be,
For we know that every Wob Will be busy on the job,
Till they swing the prison doors and set us free

Elisabeth Gurley Flynn

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn is one of the many women who stand out in the history of the Industrial Workers of the World. She was just seventeen when she shared the platform with a certain James Connolly, who she described as a “*Short, rather stout, plain looking man, [...] a scholar and an excellent writer [whose] speech was marred for American audiences by his thick North of Ireland accent.*” Connolly thought very highly of her too.

“She started out as a pure utopian, but now she laughs at her former theories. Had she stuck by her first set of opinions she would have continued a persona grata with the Socialist Party crowd,” Connolly wrote, “*but her advocacy of straight revolutionary socialism and industrial unionism alienated them and now they hate her.*”

Gurley Flynn once famously remarked, when responding to criticism of the IWW for using women as shields:

“The IWW has been accused of putting the women in the front, the truth is- the IWW does not keep them at the back- and they go to the front”

Lucy Parsons

Lucy Parsons was one of the founders of the IWW She had been involved in the foundation of the journal of IWPA in 1883. In a piece entitled ‘To Tramps, The Unemployed, the Disinherited, and Miserable,’ published in the IWPA journal, The Alarm, in 1884, she called on the poor and disenfranchised to:

“Avail yourselves of those little methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land. Learn the use of explosives!”

In 1905, she displayed similar radicalism when speaking at the IWW’s foundation (a speech that was reputedly interrupted several times by loud applause).

“We, the women of this country, have no ballot even if we wished to use it, and the only way that we can be represented is to take a man to represent us. You men have made such a mess of it in representing us that we have not much confidence in asking you !We [women] are the slaves of slaves. We are exploited more ruthlessly than men. Whenever wages are to be reduced the capitalist class use women to reduce them, and if there is anything that you men should do in the future it is to organize the women....”

A very powerful orator, said to be more dangerous than a ‘thousand rioters’ by the Chicago Police force, she quickly took to editing The Liberator, the newspaper of the IWW in the Chicago area. While class struggle was always to the front of her political agenda, she used the space this paper offered to push for, among other things, women’s right to access birth control and the legalisation of divorce. Interestingly, Parsons was highly critical of the idea of ‘free love’, and disagreed with attacks made on the traditional institutions of marriage and family by other anarchists, in particular by Emma Goldman. It is thought that Lucy Parsons married twice, firstly to Oliver Gathing, and later to Albert Parsons – a fascinating character, who had fought as a confederate soldier before becoming involved in union activism and gaining an interest in anarchism, leading to his eventual execution as one of the famous Haymarket martyrs.

Mother Jones

We can even find an Irish connection when we look at the historical role played by women in the early days of the wobblies. Mary Harris Jones, better known as Mother Jones and born in the rebel county of Cork. She was once described as *“the most dangerous woman in America,”* which must be up there with being *“more dangerous than a thousand rioters”!* She stated in her autobiography that her family had been involved in the ‘struggle against British rule’ in Ireland. Indeed her grandfather was hanged as a result of his activity in the nationalist movement. Mother Jones played a huge role in bringing the issue of Child Labour to the forefront of the political agenda, writing in her autobiography

“In the spring of 1903 I went to Kensington, Pennsylvania, where seventy-five thousand textile workers were on strike. Of this number at least ten thousand were little children....“I called upon the millionaire manufactures to cease their moral murders, and I cried to the officials in the open windows opposite, “Some day the workers will take possession of your city hall, and when we do, no child will be sacrificed on the altar of profit.”

Mother Jones famously led a group of striking children on a march all the way to the front door of a certain Theodore Roosevelt. The march, from Pennsylvania to New York City, was designed to take the issue of child labour right to the Presidents doorstep. Around 100 children took part in the march, designed to show what she termed the “New York millionaires” the suffering of working class children. She led the children all the way to the Presidents Long Island home, and when they reached the home, she was informed by the president’s secretary that Teddy himself was “unavailable”. Still, the campaign had succeeded in drawing public attention to a shocking issue. In her own words: *“We are told that every American boy has the chance of being president. I tell you that these little boys in the iron cages would sell their chance any day for good square meals and a chance to play. These little toilers whom I have taken from the mills –deformed, dwarfed in body and soul, with nothing but toil before them -have never heard that they have a chance, the chance of every American male citizen, to become the president.”*

The children carried banners with slogans like *“We want time to play!”*, *“We miss our parents”* and *“We want time to go to school”* and demanded a new federal law prohibiting the exploitation of children in the work place. While they failed in this, it was clear Mother Jones was standing by her own life philosophy to *“pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living.”*

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