

# Eleanor Marx: fighting for working women and trade union rights

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Eleanor Marx: A Life

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Rachel Holmes' new biography highlights Eleanor Marx's important contribution to the birth of mass trade unionism, women's liberation and socialist politics in the late 19th century. However, Holmes' labeling of her as a feminist blurs Eleanor's socialist and class, argues Joy Macready

Eleanor Marx was a revolutionary writer, orator, organiser, fighter, socialist and internationalist to her core – a person of words and action. Her life story is worth telling, and Rachel Holmes does an admirable job in creating a three-dimensional picture of Eleanor's life.

Brought up in a household where German, English and French were spoken on a daily basis, she earned renown as a gifted translator, tackling literary masterpieces such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as well as key political texts, including the *History of the Paris Commune* by Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray; *Anarchism and Socialism* by Georgi Plekhanov; and in 1885 she participated in the translation into English of volume one of her father's *Capital*.

She also played an invaluable role as an interpreter at congresses of the Second International, as well as an International Miners' Congress. For her efforts, the Miners' Federation and the Miners' Union presented her with 'a beautiful little writing case and a stylographic pen' because she refused to take any payment.

Eleanor edited much of her father's, Karl Marx, works, including *Value, Price and Profit*, written in 1865. She was a prolific journalist and writer, a theoretician as well as practical organiser. She also volunteered to help working class militants by providing free literary and numeracy classes, as well as language classes.

After her father's death in 1883, Eleanor wrote: 'My father was talking of my eldest sister and of me and said: 'Jenny is most like me, but Eleanor (my dear old home name) is me.' It was true – except that I shall never be good and unselfish as he was.'<sup>2</sup>

Her tireless efforts to build socialism in Britain and internationally proved this last estimate to be utterly false. She had the brilliance, the spark and the will to devote herself to socialist politics her whole life. Respected and admired by most, she did not shy away from a political argument.

She played an instrumental role in the development of New Unionism and produced important theoretical work on the woman question.

## Early life

Born on 16 January 1855 in Soho, London, Eleanor was the youngest of three sisters that survived into adulthood, together with Jenny and Laura. The Marxes had two sons and one daughter that died in infancy. On Engels' deathbed, she also found out that she had a half brother, Freddy, who was the son of the Marxes' housekeeper Helene Demuth, their beloved Nymmy.

Eleanor (pronounced to rhyme with pussy not fussy) was born in Victorian Britain, where women had no right to an education ? they were barred from university and most professions. They could neither stand for office nor vote in national elections, and had no control over their reproductive rights. On most matters concerning property too they were effectively the wards of their husbands or fathers. It was a fully patriarchal society though a minority of talented and courageous women were already fighting to right these crying injustices. Eleanor became one of them.

Early in her life she boldly asked: 'What is it that we as socialists desire?', and spent her whole life searching for answers to this question. Eleanor had the brilliance of her father and was steeped in his political methodology ? she and Volume I of Capital spent the first decade of her life together. With a house full of books surrounding her, though she had little formal education she was a voracious reader and her father was ever ready to answer her questions.

Eleanor started intervening in politics at an early age. At the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, when she was six years old, she wrote letters of advice to Abraham Lincoln (which Marx didn't post). At eight, she supported Poland when the country was invaded by Russia in 1863 ? in a letter to her uncle, she wrote that she was holding up a finger for the Poles, 'brave little fellows'.

Her friends included Olive Schreiner, a South African novelist and anti-war activist; May Morris, the daughter of William Morris; Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the first Englishwoman to qualify as a surgeon; and German socialist Clara Zetkin. Her male friends included Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw; Will Thorne, the first general secretary of the Trade Union Congress; Wilhelm Liebknecht, co-founder of German Social Democracy (and Karl's father); plus Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein.

After her father's death, Engels effectively replaced him in the role of guardian and advisor. Engels' companions, the sisters Mary and Lizzie Burns, who were involved in the Irish Republican movement, also influenced Eleanor's political development. The 12-year old Eleanor enthusiastically supported the 1867 Fenian Rising in county Kerry and then Dublin, and campaigned for the release of the political prisoners. She condemned the hanging of the Manchester Martyrs ? Philip Allen, Michael Larkin, and Michael O'Brien ? who were executed for the killing of a police officer.

When Eleanor was 16, the Paris Commune exploded in March 1871, lasting until May. Both Eleanor's older sisters had married French revolutionaries: Laura married Paul Lafargue, influenced by anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Louis Auguste Blanqui; and Jenny married Charles Longuet, also a militant Proudhonist

In fact, Laura was in Bordeaux with two gravely ill sons, Marc Laurent and Charles, while her husband had gone missing on the journey to Paris. In April Jenny and Eleanor went to Laura's aid. By the time they got there, Paul had turned up but police spies were closing in, so they fled to the Spanish border in the Pyrenees at the beginning of August, after Marc Laurent's death.

When Jenny and Eleanor returned to France on foot, they were immediately seized by the police, interrogated for two days and then held under house arrest for a week before being dumped at the Spanish border. The bourgeois newspapers at that time reported that three of Marx's 'brothers' had been interned in France.

The astonishing secret was that Jenny had been able to conceal an incriminating letter to Marx from Gustave Flourens, a famed leader of the Paris Commune, murdered by the Versailles troops after his capture on 3 April, 1871. When they were brought into the gendarmerie, she had hid it in a ledger on the booking officer's desk – so while the Lafargues' flat was being searched, it was in plain view.

After the fall of the Paris Commune, Communard refugees flooded into London, many passing through the Marxes' house, No 1 Modena Villas, Hampstead. From them Eleanor learned about the legendary women street fighters of the Paris Commune and the year before had met Elisabeth Demetriooff, a Russian revolutionary, who during the uprising organised the Union de femmes and women's committees in every Paris arrondissement (borough). She also fought on the barricades in the last week of the Commune and survived.

Eleanor too had Communard admirers, including Leo Frankel, a Hungarian; Nikolai Morozov, Russian member of the People's Will (Narodnaya Volya) which assassinated Alexander II in 1881; and Karl Hirsch, German socialist and editor. But she also developed a marked preference for Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, 17 years her senior, the first historian of the Commune. A long engagement ensued until it was broken off in 1881.

On Sundays, the Marxes would open up their house to the exiled revolutionary community in London, what they called 'at homes', and most revolutionaries at one time or another crossed their threshold to engage in political discussion, often quite heated debate, about the way forward for the socialist movement in Europe and beyond. Her friend, Clara Collet's memory of the Marxes' house was of a 'room full of people all talking French at the top of their voices'.

Throughout her twenties, Eleanor was actively involved in London education policy, the debate over Irish home rule, the evolution of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the amnesty campaign for Communards, which was finally granted in 1880.

She was also a talented amateur actor, forming the 'Dogberry Club' with Clara.

From the age of 16, Eleanor became her father's secretary and accompanied him to socialist conferences around Europe, as well as helping him with research at the British Museum. Much later, in 1882, it was in the Reading Room where she met Edward Aveling, a freethinker and vice president of the National Secular Society who also occasionally acted on the stage. Two years later, and a year after her father's death, she and Edward began living together, but they couldn't marry because he had a wife already.

Prior to this, when Eleanor was 26, her mother, Jenny (Eleanor's older sister) died in December 1881. Just over a year later and five days before Eleanor's 28th birthday, Jenny died in January 1883 and then her father, just two months after her sister.

## New Unionism

The New Union movement began developing in the 1870s, but really made its mark in the 1880s. Previously, the British labour movement was organised in craft unions, a 'labour aristocracy' who were mainly skilled workers that ignored and excluded the unskilled workers.

Yet there were thousands of workers employed as unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, including dockers,

seamen, gas workers, factory workers and general labourers. These were the most oppressed layer of the British proletariat, both men and women, poorly paid and with terrible working conditions. Nevertheless in the 1880s they began to organise and take militant strike action, and won some important reforms.

In 1884, Eleanor became involved in the Women's Trade Union League, founded 10 years previously by Emma Patterson. Eleanor went on to become actively involved in a whole series of strikes. In the late 1880s there were four major strikes that enflamed the British working class. The first, which is only now being recognised for its role in taking new unionism to the next level, was the matchwomen's strike at the Bryant & May match factory in Bow, London. On 2 July 1888 these unskilled, unorganised, poverty-stricken women, went on strike, as captured in Louise Raw's book, *Striking a Light*<sup>4</sup>.

They were subject to pittance wages and terrible working conditions, and many suffered from 'phossy jaw', a form of bone cancer, as a result of lethal phosphorus fumes and poor ventilation. When a group of women refused to sign the employer's statement saying that their working conditions were fair, three were sacked – and then the vast majority of workers walked out.

They didn't leave the factory grounds, but waited at the gates for workers from the other sites to come out, told them what had happened and persuaded them not to go back after the lunch break. More than 1,500 matchworkers went on all-out indefinite strike. They had a lively and well-attended picket line and they elected a strike committee. Fourteen days into the strike, management caved in.

These workers formed a union, the Union of Women Matchmakers, and held the first meeting on 27 July. By the end of the year, it became the Matchmakers Union, open to men and women, and the following year sent its first delegate to the TUC.

It is easy to see how those women provided inspiration for a new type of trade unionism. They were young, militant and unwavering in their solidarity and support for each other. And they forced the bosses to climb down.

The next workers' action started in early spring at the Beckton Gas Works in the East End of London. The lives of the workers at Beckton, as with other gas works, were very poor: a 12 hour day, seven days a week, with the associated dangers of the job. This led to industrial unrest and in March 1889, workers from the Beckton Gas Works were laid off. Gasworkers from all over London held a protest meeting on Sunday 31 March.

Will Thorne, who went on to become the first general secretary of the National Union of Gas Workers, made a speech on that day: 'The way you have been treated in your work for many years is scandalous, brutal and inhuman. I pledge my word that, if you will stand firm and don't waver, within six months we will claim and win the eight-hour day, a six-day week and the abolition of the present slave-driving methods in vogue not only at the Beckton Gas Works, but all over the country.'<sup>5</sup> After this speech, 800 workers joined the new union on the first day, and within a month another 3000 had joined.

The gasworkers won an eight-hour day. On the back of this action, they formed National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers (NUG&GL) on 7 June. Thorne, elected leader of the union, asked Eleanor for help. She helped to draft the union rules and compose its constitution. She kept the accounts and wrote the half-year report – Thorne described her as the 'most intelligent woman he had ever known'.<sup>6</sup> She was a political agitator, travelling up and down country, sometimes speaking twice a day.

Later that year saw the Great Dock Strike, an industrial dispute involving dockworkers in the port of London. It resulted in a victory for more than 100,000 strikers and established strong trade unions amongst London dockers, one of which became the nationally important Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General

Labourers' Union. The strike is widely considered a milestone in the development of new unionism.

Eleanor had already published articles on how the dockers had to physically fight each other every morning to get work for the day ? which made it even more significant that the dockers collectivised and organised to implement a mass strike.

The Great Dock Strike started on 14 August 1889 when dockers unloading cargo on South-West India docks walked off the job when a supervisor refused to pay the extra owed to them. On 21 August 100,000 supporters demonstrated in Hyde Park, with seven bands playing the 'Marseillaise', demonstrating their revolutionary feelings.

The next day saw 37,000 workers on strike, brought out by 15,000 flying pickets; by 25 August there were more than 130,000 strikers, including stevedores, ship-painters, carpenters and biscuit and jam factory workers. The dockers organised almost daily marches through the streets, collecting money to sustain their fight. It was internationally celebrated; Australian dockers sent a £30,000 donation.

The dockers returned to work on 16 September having won all their demands. Other workers took up the call to build unions and win better conditions.

Another strike that Eleanor had direct involvement in was the Silvertown strike among workers at Silver's rubber and electrical factory, again in the East End of London docklands. (See the review of John Tully's book Silvertown below).

The Silvertown strike ended in defeat on 10 December and the employers vindictively sent the bailiffs in to evict workers from factory-owned lodgings ? so not only did they lose their jobs but also their homes.

Eleanor placed the blame for the defeat squarely on the leaders of the skilled labour unions who didn't call their members out in support of their unskilled brothers and sisters.

Despite this setback, there were major strikes in Cardiff, Bristol, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Manchester, Halifax, Hull and Tyneside. In Leeds thousands of gasworkers joined the union and won an eight-hour day. The so-called unorganised workers were organising all over the country.

Eleanor was a hugely popular speaker, and toured around all the hot spots of unionisation, including the Hammersmith shop assistants strike, onion skimmers, women workers at Barratt's sweet factory in Tottenham and the railway workers.

The year 1890 saw the first May Day demonstration, which emerged from the First Congress of the Second International, and more than 300,000 workers filled Hyde Park. Eleanor addressed the gathered workers with this speech:

'We have not come to do the work of political parties, but we have come here in the cause of labour, in its own defence, to demand its own rights. I can remember when we came in handfuls of a few dozen to Hyde Park to demand an Eight Hours' Bill, but the dozens have grown to hundreds, and the hundreds to thousands, until we have this magnificent demonstration that fills the park today. We are standing face to face with another demonstration, but I am glad to see that the great masses of the people are on our side.

'Those of us who have gone through all the worry of the Dock Strike, and especially the Gasworkers' Strike, and have seen the men, women and children stand round us, have had enough of strikes, and we are determined to secure an eight hours' day by legal enactment; unless we do so, it will be taken from us at the first opportunity.'

?I am speaking this afternoon not only as a Trade Unionist, but as a Socialist. Socialists believe that the eight hours' day is the first and most immediate step to be taken, and we aim at a time when there will no longer be one class supporting two others, but the unemployed both at the top and at the bottom of society will be got rid of. This is not the end but only the beginning of the struggle; it is not enough to come here to demonstrate in favour of an eight hours' day. We must not be like some Christians who sin for six days and go to church on the seventh, but we must speak for the cause daily, and make the men, and especially the women that we meet, come into the ranks to help us.?

She ended her speech the conclusion of the famous poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

?Rise like Lions after slumber  
In unvanquishable number,  
Shake your chains to earth like dew  
Which in sleep had fallen on you?  
Ye are many ? they are few.?

From the start of 1889 to the end of 1893, Eleanor was immersed in socialist strategy and mobilisation at home and abroad. She convened, caucused and networked. She wrote policy and think pieces, and drafted reports. Keir Hardie, Tillet and Thorne were regular visitors to Eleanor's home long before they became famous as labour leaders.

She was highly respected in the British labour movement and was given two nicknames ? ?our mother? and ?our old stoker? ? by the workers that she struggled alongside. In 1895 she published ?The Working Class Movement in England?.<sup>8</sup>

### Political representation

The 1860s were a time of political recovery for the British labour movement after the decade or so which followed the defeat and collapse of Chartism. The British unions played an important role in the International Workingmen's Association (the First International). But this proved to be a false dawn. Not only because the 1871 Paris Commune suffered defeat, and the ensuing repressive legislation, but also because a worldwide economic depression began in 1873.

However, even though the reactionary forces had the upper hand during this decade, political developments nationally and internationally continued to develop in tandem. Socialists began promoting the need for political organisation and representation ? heralded by the founding of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany (SDAP), the precursor to German SPD, by Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel in 1869 ? they ensured that it was based on Marxist principles.

In Britain, the push for a new political party for the direct representation of labour didn't really gain ground until 1880, and it came from an unlikely source: Henry Mayers Hyndman, a wealthy financier. His intention was to launch a ?really democratic party in opposition to the monstrous tyranny of Mr Gladstone? with the object of bringing about democratic changes in England?.<sup>9</sup>

Both Marx and Engels were highly sceptical about Hyndman, particularly his marked hostility to trade unionism and strikes. They wrote: ?When the [First] International was founded, we explicitly formulated the battle cry ? the emancipation of the working class must be brought about by the working class themselves. We cannot therefore associate ourselves with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves, and must be freed from above by philanthropic big bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois.?

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In June 1881, Hyndman launched the Social Democratic Federation (SDF); his manifesto lifted two chapters from Capital but introduced numerous mistakes. Hyndman was no longer welcome at 41 Maitland Park Road. Although Eleanor herself joined the SDF in 1884, Engels refused to support Hyndman's venture. The SDF fought for universal suffrage, a legal eight-hour day for industrial workers and introduction of salaries for MPs to enable working class people to enter parliament.

The 1880s saw a sharpening of political debate in Britain, which led to a number of schisms, factions, splits and regrouping amongst the socialist movement. In 1884, the Fabian Society was founded, which openly opposed class struggle, revolution and any independent party of the working class. Instead its leaders Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw, Hubert Bland and others, adopted the project of permeating the bourgeois parties, the Liberals and the Tories.

There was also a factional rift within the SDF between militant internationalists led by William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax and the more nationalistic wing led by Hyndman. Hyndman drove Bax out of editing *Today*, a magazine of scientific socialism, and installed Henry Hyde Champion in his place.

In late 1884, the rift came to a head and 10 people, including William Morris, Eleanor, Edward Aveling and Robert Banner, handed in their resignations and promptly founded the Socialist League. Their political allies in the split were anarchists. They produced *Commonweal*, a monthly newspaper, which in its first issue opposed British imperialism and the war in Sudan.

However, by the late 1880s, the Socialist League was deeply divided between those advocating political action and its opponents who were themselves split between those like William Morris, who felt that parliamentary campaigns represented inevitable compromises and corruptions, and an anarchist wing which opposed all electoral politics as a matter of principle.

Eleanor and Edward advanced the principle of participation in political campaigns, but were isolated in the party. At the Fourth Annual Conference of the Socialist League in 1888, the Bloomsbury branch, to which Eleanor and Edward belonged, moved that a meeting of all socialist bodies should be called to discuss the formation of a united organisation. This resolution was voted down by a substantial margin, as was another put forward by the same branch in support of contesting seats in both local and parliamentary elections.

The Socialist League then suspended the 80 members of the Bloomsbury branch on the grounds that the group had put up candidates jointly with the SDF, against the policy of the party. The Bloomsbury branch left the Socialist League and formed, if only briefly, the Bloomsbury Socialist Society.

Despite all the ructions in the national terrain, just five years later and three days before Eleanor's 38th birthday the British left held a conference in 1893 to form the Independent Labour Party and Keir Hardie was elected its first chairman. Eleanor attended as an observer, while Edward was a delegate. However, due to its constituent elements the ILP never moved closer to a Marxist party.

In 1897, both she and Edward re-joined the SDF.

## The International

Political developments in Britain were influenced by changes in the international socialist landscape which culminated in the creation of the Second International.

In 1886 Eleanor had helped organise the International Labour Conference in Paris. Later that year, she toured the US along with Edward and Liebknecht, raising money for the SPD.

In 1889 everything came together. It was a momentous year for two reasons: July was the centenary of the storming of the Bastille and it was the year of the Paris Exhibition to commemorate the revolution.

Two rival congresses were held in Paris that ultimately led to the founding of the Second International.

Eleanor realised the imperative of orchestrating a united congress and rallied the trade unions, as well as Hyndman, to push for a single congress.

She worked hard at the congress, translating many speeches including Clara Zetkin's on the question of female labour. The Congress passed a number of resolutions: eight hour day, disarmament to challenge the capitalist arms industry and for an international labour demonstration on 1 May. Bernstein remarked that her effort was 'superhuman'.

But as the Second International developed, the old fight between the socialists and anarchists began to heat up again. At the Fourth Congress, held in London on 27 July 1896, the majority of delegates voted to exclude the anarchists.

### The woman question

The specific role women played under capitalism was of great interest to Eleanor, and she developed a Marxist understanding of the woman question. In addition, she was very active in organising amongst women workers.

She also faced the every day struggle as a woman, torn between duty to the family and home, and her own independence. After her parents' deaths, she really came into her own as a political activist and organiser, no longer tethered by her role as daughter and carer.

She took as her starting point Engels' seminal work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*<sup>11</sup>, published in 1884, which exposed the double burden of women in the home and workplace, the root of women's oppression under capitalism.

Eleanor was clear in her socialist analysis and in developing a solution to the women's question. A year after Bebel published *Women in the Past, Present, and Future*,<sup>12</sup> which was prohibited in Germany, she together with Edward <sup>?</sup> wrote *The Woman Question: From a Socialist Point of View*,<sup>13</sup> which includes this analysis:

'The first step [towards the emancipation of women] is the expropriation of all private property in land and in all other means of production. With this would happen the abolition of the state as it now is. No confusion as to our aims is more common than that which leads woolly thinking people to imagine that the changes we desire can be brought about, and the conditions subsequent upon them can exist, under a state regime such as that of today.'

Although she fought for reforms, such as suffrage for women and the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, she didn't believe that these reforms in themselves would liberate women. 'The actual position of women in respect to men would not be very vitally touched,' they write in *The Woman Question*. They argued that it was only through the overthrow of capitalism and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines would women throw off their chains. 'Without that larger social change women will never be free.'

Her position brought her into conflict with other socialist peers, for example Ernest Bax, whom she challenged to a debate. Bax was a terrible misogynist and argued that men were in fact the oppressed sex and were exploited by women. In an open letter, Eleanor wrote:

?I am, of course, as a socialist, not a representative of ?women?s rights?. It is the sex question and its economic base that I propose to discuss with you. The so-called ?women?s rights? question (which appears to be the only one you understand) is a bourgeois idea. I proposed to deal with the sex question from the point of view of the working class and the class struggle.?14

Socialist or feminist?

Eleanor was very clear in her writings that she saw the working class as the only revolutionary force able to overthrow the capitalist system. In that sense, working class women, despite the sexism they faced on a daily basis from within their class, had more in common with working class men than they did with women from the privileged and exploiting classes.

Writing a report on the SPD?s Gotha Conference in 1896, Eleanor summarises and supports Clara Zetkin?s speech:

?Here comes the true struggle against man. Here the educated woman ? the doctor, the clerk, the lawyer, is the antagonist of man. The women of this class are sick of their moral and intellectual subjugation. They are Noras rebelling against their doll?s homes. They want to live their own lives, ?and economically and intellectually the demands of the middle-class women are fully justified?.

?Then comes the proletarian woman. She is drawn into the vortex of capitalist production because she is cheap to buy. But her position is not merely reactionary, it is also revolutionary.

??And that is why the working woman cannot be like the bourgeois woman who has to fight against the man of her own class. ?The objections of the bourgeois man to the rights of women are only a matter of competition? With the proletarian women, on the contrary, it is a struggle of the woman with the man of her own class against the capitalist class.

??Her end and aim are not the right of free competition with men, but to obtain the political power of the proletariat. Truly the workingwoman approves the demand of the middle-class women?s movement? But only as means to the end that she may be fully armed for entering into the working-class struggle along with the man of her class.??15

At this conference, Clara argued that systematic propaganda among workingwomen was ?an absolute necessity for the proletarian movement?.

Throughout the biography, Rachel Holmes attempts to frame Eleanor?s theoretical work on women within a feminist paradigm. She postulates that Eleanor was both a socialist and a feminist, equating capitalism and patriarchy as two competing systems of oppression.

Holmes argues that Eleanor saw women as ?an economic and social class, globally oppressed. Working-class and middle class women were conjoined by the inseparability of production and the reproduction required to replenish the work force. From this perspective, patriarchy and capitalism were not just blood brothers but twins.?

Referring to the same quote above, she continues: ?The necessity for women of all classes to work together, and for men and women to work together, were two of Eleanor?s key precepts?16, adding ?Eleanor and Edward argue? women should be forming a united feminist front, challenging across class divisions the divide and rule that regulates production and reproduction.?17

However, that is not what Eleanor argued, neither in what she wrote above or in any of her writings on the woman question. She clearly maintained that the interests of working class women and working class men

were not fundamentally opposed, and it was in best interests of both to unite to overthrow the bourgeois and petit bourgeois classes.

Holmes' theoretical framework effectively leads her to differentiate between everything Eleanor did with the male working class, saying that is 'socialist', whereas when she was fighting against the subjugation of working class women that is solely within the realm of 'feminism'. The logical conclusion of this analysis is that socialism doesn't provide answers for working class women.

On the contrary, Eleanor was steadfast in her analysis that only with the overthrow of capitalism would women of all classes truly be free.

### Her death

As a socialist, Eleanor dedicated her life to the class struggle. But that did not mean she gave that struggle a narrow trade union or economic interpretation. She recognised oppression in its many forms whether this was on grounds of gender, nation or 'race'. Not only did she fight against sexism and for women's liberation, but also the anti-Semitism that was rife within the British and international labour movement. She was a fiery speaker and inspired many of the next generation of socialist agitators, including Sylvia Pankhurst.

Tragically, Eleanor committed suicide by swallowing hydrogen cyanide, then called prussic acid, and died on 31 March 1898, at her home on Jew's Walk in Sydenham, south London. Her desperate decision was taken after discovering that Edward had secretly married a young actress and bought a flat, while still draining her of most of the money bequeathed her by Engels. This came after he had blackmailed her half brother Freddy for years, as well as borrowing money from her friends and taking money from workers' organisations.

Others had tried to warn her but she had resolutely defended Edward, believing these were politically-motivated slanders. The depths of deceit to which Edward had sunk and the shame she felt probably too proved much for her to bear.

But her terrible end should not blind us to her achievements. The tributes that poured in from all sides testify to this. Will Thorne, who she had helped so ably in the Gasworkers strike remembered her in 1925 when he wrote in his memoirs:

'But for this tragedy, I believe Eleanor would have still been living and would have been a greater women's leader than the greatest of contemporary women.'<sup>18</sup>

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