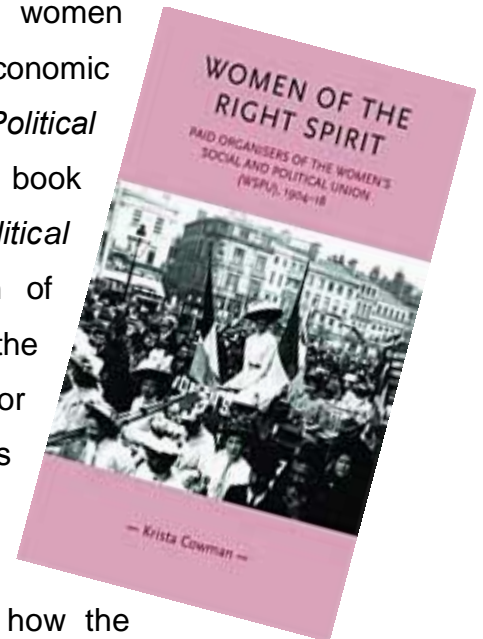


## Book Review - Lin Lovell

**Krista Cowman (2007)**

***Women of the Right Spirit – Paid Organisers of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) 1904-1918***  
**Manchester University Press: Manchester**

In the early Twentieth Century, various groups of women struggled heroically to gain political, social and economic equality. One such group was the *Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)*. Krista Cowman recently published a book entitled: *Paid Organisers of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) 1904-18*, as part of the expansion of research into the history of women and gender since the 1970s. The series Gender in History provides a forum for research into women's and gender history. Cowman's book attempts to synthesize new approaches using local studies, and extensive use of archival sources, a wide ranging use of secondary literature to explore how the WSPU functioned as a political organisation.



The book is broadly thematic. The early chapters define the function of the organisation, the characteristics of the itinerant organiser and district organisers who worked in fixed locations across the country. This is followed the work done by women at the WSPU's London headquarters. The book also addresses the concern shown by historians of the autocratic leadership and the mechanisms used to enable it to function as a political establishment. Finally, Cowman identifies that the campaign changed direction after the outbreak of war in August 1914.

Cowman raises questions the issue of militancy which has been at the centre of many contemporary debates 'about the efficacy of the WSPU's campaign' (p.119). Historians have in general centred largely on the theme of militancy

overlooking the supporting role of paid workers within the union. It is acknowledged that only a small number of women were engaged in militant activities.<sup>1</sup> The prison experience was shared by over 1,000 women which was only a small percentage of the overall membership.<sup>2</sup>

Cowman identifies that there are a number of difficulties when collecting suffrage memories. The Suffrage Fellowship was started in 1926 and shaped the narrative of much of the 'first wave' suffrage history using the experiences of those who went to prison.<sup>3</sup> Other sources construct an account of the work of the WSPU on a larger scale (Pankhurst 1931). Much of this material is autobiographical providing a detailed account of suffrage campaigns and of specific experiences of militancy but very little is known about how the WSPU functioned as an organisation. Previous historian's work has focused on the leadership and has failed to cast spotlight on the tranche of activists below the leadership.

*Women of the Right Spirit* opens up a new area of study focusing exclusively on women employed as WSPU organisers and volunteers from 1904 to 1918, expanding our knowledge of a previously ignored but important function of the Suffrage campaign, the 'mechanisms through which the WSPU operated as a political organisation' (p.5). Cowman's book directs us to a re-appraisal of the complexity of the structure of the Union, by expanding our understanding of how the numerous activities carried out in London and the regions were underpinned by a large number of paid workers and volunteers.<sup>4</sup> Organisers co-ordinated the many activities undertaken by the WSPU and it was these women who really made the campaigns happen. Their duties included

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<sup>1</sup> New developments in militancy changed after 1911 after refusal of the authorities to sanction a public enquiry into what became known as 'Black Friday' demonstration in November 1910 when many women had their breasts twisted and skirts raised by the police.

<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to recover exact numbers of membership as women joined in London and in the provinces

<sup>3</sup> The Suffrage Fellowship Collection now housed in the Museum of London was set up to gather prisoner's experiences (needs further explanation)

<sup>4</sup> The exact numbers of women who were employed as organisers are elusive but some records show that in 1911 there were 110. Paid workers earned £2 a week

organising and managing national events, including the ‘monster’ demonstrations, prepared supporting propaganda and produced the Union’s newspaper<sup>5</sup> (p.5).

The movement grew very quickly and by 1909 Emmeline Pethick Lawrence<sup>6</sup> made an appeal in *Votes for Women*, (p.30) offering training of three months duration and the provision of a sum to cover board and lodging. The new recruits were given time to decide whether this was the right vocation for them and whether they were fitted for the work involved. She writes ‘We must have women of the right spirit and right temperament. The method and routine of the organisation we can teach them’ (p.30). Cowman observes that the evidence of training in ‘the methods and routines’ of the WSPU, remain unexplained and elusive (p.30). It was more than likely that this was ‘on the job training’ carried out by the more experienced workers.

Although we may not know the actual the activities and methods undertaken by the workers, it is possible to identify the range of skills which must have underpinned its day to day operations, such as typewriting and the seemingly menial but vital tasks of envelope addressing and keeping petty cash books. Evidence shows that the strict keeping of accounts was part of the work carried out the headquarters in Clements’s Inn.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the production of large numbers of photographic postcards recording major processions and portrait photographs were also produced.<sup>8</sup>

Annie Kenny’s<sup>9</sup> an organiser in her autobiography outlines the requirements of a good deal of initiative, excellent organisational skills and trust (p.67).

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<sup>5</sup> The WSPU’s official newspaper from 1907 to 1912 was *Votes for Women* and its successor *Suffragette*

<sup>6</sup> Mrs Emmeline Pethick Lawrence (1867-1954) Born Bristol, married Frederick Lawrence editor of the *Labour Record*. She joined the WSPU in 1906 became treasurer and co-editor of its paper.

<sup>7</sup> Raeburn Antonia *The Militant Suffragettes* (1973) Michael Joseph London

<sup>8</sup> Tickner Lisa *The Spectacle of Women – Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907–14* (1988) Chatto and Windus, London

<sup>9</sup> Miss Annie Kenney (1879=1953) Born Lancashire, father a cotton minder. Began mill work at 10, became involved in socialism, trade union work and suffrage. Appointed a full time organiser 1905 in

Cowman shows that working for the Union helped many young women to overcome their diffidence and become successful organisers. The WSPU leadership were emphatic that an effective organiser should be able ‘to get voluntary workers to do all kinds of work and not to do everything themselves’ (p.32). In addition, many organisers were required to take on public speaking and in 1910 a series of classes were held to learn a variety of skills including handling hecklers and elocution to overcome the terrors of public speaking.

Cowman’s chapter on the life of the itinerant organisers uncovers their varied and different backgrounds. By 1908 every social class in Britain was represented among the ranks of the WSPU organisers (p.20). “Mill girls and pupil teachers were to be found side by side with titled ladies and colonel’s wives at the Union Headquarters, in its district offices and on itinerant campaigns” (p.20). A significant number of the membership had radical party-political affiliations and the WSPU whilst based in Manchester, used the growing trend of Northern Socialists to carry out street corner and factory-gate meetings (p.12). All of these women and those from a pupil teacher environment had skills that were readily utilised by the WSPU as they were seen as efficient and self-motivated.

Itinerant organisers travelled the length and breadth of Britain, developing and strengthening local branches, holding outdoor meetings. Mary Gawthorpe, a leading organiser, recalls her work in Manchester in June 1909 and how she took her campaign to North Wales and the Lancashire coast (p.48).<sup>10</sup> Cowman illustrates how the life of these workers was by no means easy. They were involved in organising publicity, giving a political education to the local women, gaining and keeping recruits to the Union, building campaigns through short bursts of intensive work. Records show that for many

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Lancashire and Bristol 1907-12 and then at headquarters, effectively taking charge during Christabel Pankhurst exile.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Gawthorpe was appointed as one of the six original organisers in 1905. Her background was as a worker for the Women’s Labour League (WLL). The daughter of a Leeds tanner and she became part of the pupil teacher system of education.

organisers it was a 'long weary day with many obstacles' (p.44). Cowman recounts how their work often affected their personal life, many of the organisers put off marriage and a social life to continue with their important suffrage work.

When by-elections were held the itinerant workers were able to move around the country helping organise activities, and could make a huge difference to the outcomes of the vote. The Union campaigned in all by-elections where a government candidate was standing and they could achieve their aim of preventing a Liberal victory (p.41). The national press at the time attributed Churchill's defeat in Manchester, at least in part, to the WSPU campaign (p.42).

After 1907 the WSPU re-assessed its approach to regional work and the post of district organiser was created, enabling the women to work in the provinces for longer periods of time. In addition, during rapid growth of the Union smaller centres would use the organiser's skills more effectively. Twenty-three were listed in 1910 and in the following year seventy-four were documented. District organisers were employed in around twenty-five areas between 1909 and 1914 (p.68).

Working life in the provinces was varied. Paid organisers helped the local volunteers build the branches, organising and running local campaigns. An important part of their work was maintaining and developing a strong relationship between themselves and volunteers. To be effective in her role as an organiser she had to gather round her a group of willing and enthusiastic volunteers. It was their role to inspire and maintain the volunteer's fervour often through difficult times. The district organiser provided a support network for the local membership and it was important that the workers recognised that many of their volunteers needed to fit their unpaid activities with full time work and domestic duties. Volunteers often lacked the

self-assurance of the organisers and frequently faced disapprobation of friends and neighbours.

The tasks carried out by district organiser ranged from tramping round all the available halls in the area taking notes on their suitability and acoustic qualities often overcoming opposition to the WSPU and a booking was often denied. They arranged the printing and selling of tickets for the many local events and found cheap ways of advertising, by using innovative techniques to gain attention to their cause. On one occasion in Manchester Mary Gawthorpe devised a human advertisement each women carrying a letter through the streets of the city to make the name Christabel Pankhurst (p.78).

Although the work could be exciting and different, there was also a range of mundane tasks which needed to be completed. All organisers were required to complete a weekly diary of their work and they were given a sample diary which described the amount of effort expected of them. The diary suggested how to plan their work for a public meeting and how to carry out 'At Home'<sup>11</sup> meetings. Organisers could choose the day and time of the meetings which in general were held in the evening so that working women could attend. Consideration was also given type of room used or hired for the meetings choosing ones which would be less intimidating to working-class women. The diary also suggested ways to decorate private carriages and brakes to advertise a meeting. The completed diary had to be sent down to headquarters every week.

The district organisers became the accessible face of the Union and were often the means by which national policies were disseminated throughout the regions. These women had the authority to mould and interpret directives in order to become innovative and fit with local conditions. Cowman identifies that without a team of successful organisers in the provinces, the WSPU

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<sup>11</sup> 'At Home' meetings were a regular gathering of members and sympathisers. These meeting began in London shortly after WSPU moved to Clemet's Inn. These meeting were less formal and could involve some business discussion. The meeting were social events providing tea and biscuits.



would have found it difficult to achieve the coherence or the longevity of their campaigns. The permanent organisers affected events where their organising talents were deployed to ensure the success of a campaign such as Women's Sunday (p.67). The district organiser was concerned with the planning and co-ordinating of militant activities. The expectations of militant behaviours were not fixed and the women members could chose which level of militancy they would follow. This could be the wearing the WSPU's colours or to actions which would result in imprisonment. Full-time organisers at the start of the campaign joined in militant action. Their salaries of £2 a week freed them from the fear of losing their livelihoods if they were imprisoned, but as time went on organisers became less involved as more women joined in militant action.

Organisers' co-ordinated the militant activities such as window breaking and moved people and equipment for those involved in acts of violence and arson. The women procured hammers, made the black bags to store the stones for window breaking, handed out passwords and directions. Explosives and corrosive agents were often manufactured by the membership who had scientific training (p.140).

Organisers were constantly involved in fund raising. Many resourceful methods of raising money were employed and even a jumble sale required careful planning. The organiser had to submit carefully recorded accounts by post each week. Their financial responsibility was taken very seriously. Despite the problems the role of district organiser could be very rewarding and collectively their contribution to campaigns was greater than that of the national leadership.

Like all political organisations it was important to have an official headquarters which could accommodate officials and provide an address from which propaganda could be sent out. The Union grew rapidly once it moved to London in 1906. Starting with two rooms in Clements Inn they quickly

expanded into rooms in the building next door. By 1912 the WSPU moved all its activities to Lincolns Inn which was chosen as a model building because its size provided a triumphant expression of the progress of the union. The move provided the opportunity to structure offices into departments. Office space was carefully organised and the leaders were provided with their own office. The controlling of finance was given priority with Mrs Pethick Lawrence running her own treasury team (p.92). Other offices were allocated according to the importance of the work being done. Advertising had its own department and the manager Kitty Marshall 'raised the required £250 each week by selling advertising slots to large stores' (p.106). There was a packing department which despatched official merchandise. A separate office was allocated for large one off events such as exhibitions and marches requiring meticulous co-ordination and planning. The information department was widened to include a typist, a general office girl and several volunteer staff including Emily Davison.<sup>12</sup> This department remained in the background but shaped much of the campaigns presentations, selecting and supplying data to the leadership and formed the basis of their speeches. They were charged with supplying pithy material and verifying quotations and looking up facts in the British Museum. 'Mary Leigh, who had first- hand knowledge of their work singled out Aeta Lamb and Mary Home as the 'real brains' behind some of Christabel Pankhurst's best-known rhetoric' (p.108).

There was pride in the new building's modernity, with many up to the minute innovations including the use of electricity, with electric clocks in all rooms, controlling time centrally. In addition, the building boasted an electronic lift. A telephone switchboard employed several women. Headquarters became a source of power and decision making and not just a physical location. This may have fuelled later impressions that there was something sinister in the way headquarters operated. The WSPU was a political organisation where

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<sup>12</sup> Emily Davison ran onto the Derby race course and collided with the King's horse fracturing her skull. She died five days later without gaining consciousness. The evidence as to her intentions is mixed. Her funeral procession on the 14<sup>th</sup> June 1913 was attended by 40,000 women. (Tickner p.138)



demonstrations and campaigns had to be planned, militancy co-ordinated. The women employees remained loyal to an unapologetically autocratic structure. Policy was not discussed and in general women fell into line behind the leadership. One of the affects of modernisation meant that the police monitored calls and their presence increased with the move.

A job at headquarters involved long hours of work and modest rates of pay but it was for many a site of glamour. The wide range of work undertaken and a staff of predominantly young women made for a unique working environment. The WSPU headquarters was always more than a central set of offices but more a place where dozens of young women came together to share their comradeship and political activism. 'What remains most striking about headquarters is that all of the work was done by women, who consistently sought a feminised way of doing things' (p.115). An atmosphere of urgent excitement was generated by the closeness of the leaders and the increasingly frequent police raids. The police raids took away van loads of records. On one occasion Esther Knowles became 'the heroine of the hour' when she stowed the contents of the cashbox in her knickers during one raid and saw this as great fun (p.103).

Cowman's final chapter addresses the complete change in direction which took place in the WSPU after the declaration of war in August 1914. The organisation became a shadow of what it had been. At the very beginning of the war organisers continued with the demands of meetings, paper sales and fund raising in the suffragette shops. At this time it was not clear that the Union was about to face some of its most serious challenges, whilst the rank and file continued with their day-to-day activities. The leadership suspended the publication of the *Suffragette* as this would save resources and as most thought the war would soon be over this seem a realistic course to take. The leadership of the WSPU and the few retained organisers put their efforts into gigantic processions and parades for women's war work organised in 1915

and 1916, an echo of the WSPU's monster demonstrations, the only difference being that they were now funded by the Liberal Government.

Cowman's last theme was what happened to the careers of WSPU organisers after the vote was won and the extent to which work in the WSPU was grounding for a future political career. She concludes that many women gained their 'political experience' in their own towns. Cowman stresses that without the efforts of full-time organisers the WSPU could not sustain a national campaign and ends with a quote from Christabel Pankhurst who recalled:

"Our organisers must have their tribute... They were willing to sacrifice all, and attempt all, for the cause. Sent, it might be, to some outpost in North, South, East or West of the country, they would plant the flag, take an office, interview the Press, call upon the leading women of the place... address meetings, enrol members, arrange more meetings ... and in addition to all, raise the money for their own campaign and have a balance to send to the central treasury. Their political understanding made them equal to in every occasion...Scorning delights, they lived laborious days and joyed [sic] in doing it, finding their happiness in present service and future victory." (p. 208).

This book will appeal to academics, post graduates and undergraduates with an interest in women's history. It provides a new understanding of the extent of the support for the votes for women campaign and how a diverse group of women came together to support the cause.

## References

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