

Working with Labour

*‘The grey
hairs sprout’*

Jo Vellacott

Catherine Marshall was a vital figure in the women’s suffrage movement in Britain before the First World War. Using her remarkable political skills on behalf of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies, she built close connections with major suffragist politicians, leading some – in all three parties – to consider adopting a measure of women’s enfranchisement as a party plank. This extract from the new edition of Jo Vellacott’s acclaimed book, From Liberal to Labour with Women’s Suffrage: The Story of Catherine Marshall (Spokesman, £17.99), recounts efforts to bring the miners onside.

The National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NU) executive and the Election Fighting Fund for Women’s Suffrage (EFF) committee were clear that the best way to keep Labour onside might be to keep up the pressure at the grassroots, converting the unconverted and making sure that the converted stayed that way. The two routes to this were through constituency work – at by-elections or in preparation for the general election – and through the trade unions. Catherine Marshall’s autumnal exile in the north did not prevent her from taking a keen and active interest in the special campaign planned for the autumn of 1915.

There was good reason to focus on the miners. Of the constituent bodies of the Labour Party, the trade unions had been seen at the start of the EFF policy as likely to be the section most in need of coaxing along. By 1915, little anxiety remained as to most of the unions. An unpublished EFF report dated 27 December 1912 comments, ‘most of the Trades Unions will stand by

Jo Vellacott is an internationally celebrated peace historian whose works include

Conscientious Objection: Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War (Spokesman £14.99).

the women,' but adds, 'the real anxiety is the vote of the miners, who have been joining the Labour Party in large numbers lately ... Let us hope that the miners will not be a drag on the wheel of progress.' The miners' unions had in fact affiliated to the Labour Party in 1909, but remained in many areas at best Lib-Lab; the miners in the Parliamentary Labour Party also often showed signs of their old Liberal allegiance, and at times took a somewhat independent attitude to Party policy. Robert Cooper, a staunch suffragist and the husband of Selina Cooper, one of the NU's best organisers and speakers, wrote in early 1913 that he did not think the miners' MPs could be counted on for support of women's suffrage. George Barnes, for instance, favoured supporting a government male suffrage bill, and Cooper was not reassured by his saying that he would go with whatever the Party decided, since Cooper thought this might mean Barnes would try to sway the Party to reverse its decision not to vote for any bill that did not include women.

Margaret Robertson devoted a great deal of her time in 1913 and 1914 to what was virtually a special mission to the miners. She kept in close touch with Catherine, and worked with the aid of several able helpers among the trained organisers. Particularly 'bad places' were targeted, and 'good individuals there' identified; Robertson reported that 'Mrs Townley w[oul]d be good for *bad* miners,' and Mrs Oldham also particularly liked working with this group, while Selina Cooper too was regarded as very successful with miners. Eleanor Rathbone (one of the few independently wealthy members of the NU) contributed substantially to the salary of a special worker for the propaganda campaign among the miners. The concrete objective was to get a strong resolution passed at the Trade Union Congress in September 1913. Catherine consulted with Arthur Peters about finding a good man to move the resolution – all were agreed that it must be moved by a man to have its best chance of success, and that 'a miner would be best'. Robertson saw herself as working almost from the inside, and warned Catherine to be careful whom she approached, and how. The NU must keep a low profile, as the TUC was not, she pointed out, like the Labour Party conference, where the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Fabians, the Women's Labour League (WLL), and so on were all represented: 'This is *pure Trade Union*, and *very* jealous of outside interference'. Robertson was working closely with Margaret Bondfield, of the ILP and the WLL, who had no official connection with the NU. In June a further imaginative step was taken; the NU organisers formed a union and took steps to affiliate with the TUC, becoming entitled to send a delegate to the Congress.

Catherine had just left for Hawse End [her home near Keswick in the Lake District] when the Trade Union Congress met in Manchester (1 to 6 September 1913). For some reason, and greatly to the NU's dismay, there was initially no women's suffrage resolution on the agenda, but the women's friends managed to get the issue before the Congress in the form of an addendum to a resolution on electoral reform, brought forward annually by the parliamentary committee. A much stronger resolution condemning the government's treatment of the franchise issue was also introduced by several unions. Although Arthur Peters [chief Labour Party election agent] sounded confident of the outcome when he wrote to Catherine on the second day of the Congress, the issue turned into a cliffhanger. The miners' caucus met that day and decided not to give their support to the women's suffrage resolution. Margaret Robertson described what happened, writing to Catherine, 'Did I tell you of the agonies at the Trades Union Congress? How the miners actually decided to vote *against* and I had to chase all round and see them individually and get them to meet again and reverse it (deadly secret of course that I had anything to do with it). That sort of thing makes the grey hairs sprout!'

Robertson's powers of persuasion were astounding, and the outcome of the second miners' caucus, on the Thursday, was all that could have been hoped for. Annie Townley, one of the EFF's labour organisers, worked with Robertson in bringing the miners onside, and Ben Turner of the textile union is described as 'Miss Robertson's most valuable ally'. Turner had long been a friend of Isabella Ford, cooperating with her on the organisation of women workers in Leeds, and the incident provides a good example of how the groundwork for suffrage work in industrial areas had been laid by the earlier work of such women as Ford. When the question came to the floor on Friday, the Congress was markedly impatient with the one brave soul (not a miner) who attempted to speak against women's suffrage, and passed the resolutions with only six dissentients. The resolution was sent out at once, together with Robertson's report from the *Common Cause* [the NU journal], to the prime minister, other ministers, and MPs in industrial and mining districts.

The triumph at the TUC was part of a long and carefully orchestrated campaign among the miners. The ground had been skilfully prepared not only by the work of Margaret Robertson and other organisers, but by leaflets and articles in the *Common Cause* on mining conditions, dangers, and the needs of miners' wives; and an extensive follow-up had been planned even before the outcome of the Congress was known. The annual meeting of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB) took place in

Scarborough on 8 October, and Robertson, working with the local suffrage society, planned a women's suffrage demonstration for the same evening, booking a large theatre for the occasion. She herself went on holiday immediately after the TUC, and had to miss the Scarborough meeting, but she wrote to Catherine from Italy, 'I am wildly excited about that. I *do* hope its [sic] a success. I wish I could be there.' It was a precedent-setting occasion; 'for the first time in history, one of the largest and most influential trade unions in the country sent speakers officially to represent it at a Suffrage demonstration.' Two of the miners' MPs (W. Brace and Albert Stanley) spoke 'really well' on behalf of the MFGB, Robert Smillie said a few strongly supportive words, Isabella Ford chaired the meeting and one of the NU's liveliest speakers, Muriel Matters (a recent convert from the Women's Social and Political Union), also spoke. Selina Cooper had spent the previous month in the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire 'more or less working the meeting up.' Even before the meeting, Margaret Robertson told Catherine, 'I have great hopes of its political effect, and of its effect in binding the miners to us.' Miss Evans, the NU secretary, sent Catherine a vivid account of the trimmings of the occasion, taken care of, apparently, by a local suffrage leader: 'They had a reception to the speakers and delegates on the platform first which seems to have been a complete success, all the speakers and delegates were given button holes in our colours and all the women sprays of flowers in our colours. Besides the miners they had representatives of the Trades Council, the Shop Assistants Union, Plumbers Union, Railway Men's, Women's Cooperative Guild, Women's Railway Union. They seem to have thoroughly well organised the meeting.'

The political effect Robertson referred to was directed not only at the Labour Party, but at the Liberal Party, which had always had so much support in the mining areas. Asquith, too, might well be pushed farther along the road to women's suffrage by the demonstration of massive grassroots support – and that from what had been regarded as the most recalcitrant group – for a truly democratic franchise, rather than for adult male suffrage. The politically minded leaders of the NU knew what they were doing. The *Common Cause* reported: 'The question of the vote is no longer a question of sex; Cabinet Ministers who delude themselves with this belief – if any exist – are lamentably out of touch with public feeling, and particularly with the labour movement. In the Scarborough speeches, the note continually struck was: "this [is] a question of democracy," and the audience responded with an enthusiasm and a unanimity which indicated that the hour of women's triumph is not so far off as many

politicians think.’

Talking women’s suffrage to miners was nothing new to Catherine, who had spoken to mining audiences in Cumberland from almost her earliest suffrage days. By 1913, and in this new, major campaign, Margaret Robertson took most of the responsibility for planning, coordination, and making the best use of the EFF’s labour organisers, although always in consultation with Catherine (or Alice Clark), and ultimately subject to their direction as officers of the NU. But it was not to be expected that Catherine would resist any opportunity that presented itself for hands-on involvement, and she managed to spend a week in her old stamping ground in the largely mining community of Whitehaven and the Egremont division. This time she did not have to do all the work alone, but had the help of several EFF organisers, including some who paid attention to the area on a regular basis. Writing to Lord Robert Cecil just after her return to Hawse End, she described the experience at some length, such length in fact that she cut the story down drastically before sending it. Once more, her description leaves an impression of hard work, yet also of keen enjoyment:

I have just got home from a week’s campaign in the Cumberland mining district. I should have no fear of a referendum there! We had 3 or 4 meetings a day ... and carried our resolution demanding the fulfilment of the Government’s pledges every time, in most cases unanimously. At one village we held a very successful meeting, catching two shifts of the miners. They insisted that we must go again some morning to catch the other shift, so I and a labour man (a really fine speaker) tramped out there at 11 o’clock one day, and talked to a keenly interested audience in the village billiard room – in an atmosphere so thick with smoke you couldn’t see to the far end of it. At twelve o’clock I was going to stop, as I knew the men went down the pit at one, and had to get their dinner first; but an old man at the back stood up and said: ‘We can have our dinners every day. We can’t have this every day. You go on, Miss – unless you’re wanting *your* dinner.’ Every single man then signed a ‘Friends’ card, and filled his pockets with more to get his neighbours to sign ...

Catherine’s Cumberland campaign was, as she pointed out, directed towards long-term aims, both in relation to the miners’ constituency within the Labour Party and in relation to the coming general election.