



ELIZABETH
GURLEY FLYNN

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

A Speak Out Now pamphlet

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

Rebel with a Cause



There are many heroes and heroines in the working-class movement, but sadly most workers today have never heard their names or their stories. One such heroine that everyone should know about is Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Her life spanned huge upsurges in the US working class movement. She was born in 1890 and lived until 1964, from the time of the Populist Movement to that of the Civil Rights Movement.

Flynn was born in Boston, one of a sixth generation of Irish rebels and the daughter of working-class activists. She was already a soapbox street-corner speaker at the age of 16 in New York City, where she earned the nickname the “Red Flame” and the “Joan of Arc of the working class.”

She was a lifelong fighter for women’s rights and socialism. Flynn titled her first speech “*What Socialism Will Do for Women.*” She spoke about “the possibility, at least under socialism, of industrializing all domestic tasks by collective kitchens, and dining places, nurseries, laundries and the like.”

Flynn knew that capitalism denied women equal opportunity with men. In another street corner speech, she said “The state should provide for the maintenance of every child so that individual women shall not be compelled to depend for support upon the individual man while bearing children. The barter and sale that go under the name of love are highly obnoxious.”

She was active all of her life in fighting for women's rights. She campaigned during World War II for equal pay and opportunities for women and for the creation of day care centers for working women's children. She was also an early advocate of birth control.



While she had several relationships with men and had one son, Flynn consciously chose to be an activist and to forego the traditional role of wife and mother. She openly challenged the attitudes of some of her male activist friends, who thought a women's place was in support of "her man" and not on the battlefields of the class struggle.

She traveled the country from one end to the other, a fighter for the worker's cause. From 1906 to 1926, she was a leader in 20 strikes and was arrested 15 times. Flynn was an organizer with the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), a revolutionary union that was very active in the early 1900s. In 1907, at 17 years of age, she was the only woman delegate from the Western Federation of Miners, a militant and active miner's union, to the IWW Convention.

Flynn was an active leader in the IWW campaigns for free speech for revolutionaries and trade unionists. When militants were denied the right to speak in public, IWW members from around the country would descend on the town and keep giving speeches and getting arrested until the jails were full. At this point the town leaders usually gave in and allowed the IWW to go about their organizing without interference.



In 1909, Flynn was part of a militant textile strike in New York City. And in 1912, she was a key organizer in the textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, called the “Bread and Roses Strike”. A sign carried by some women workers in Lawrence said, “We want Bread and Roses too.” The workers not only wanted better wages but they wanted time and opportunity for culture and education and a chance to enjoy their lives. These ideas of the Lawrence strike were expressed in a song “Bread and Roses”, that has become a battle cry of women workers ever since.

Bread and Roses *by James Oppenheim*

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for – but we fight for roses, too!

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler – ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

This strike involved thousands of workers, many of them immigrants, from dozens of countries. They held simultaneous strike meetings in their own languages to discuss how the strike should be run. Flynn commented on this, saying, "We spoke to nationalities who had been traditionally enemies for centuries in hostile European countries, like the Greeks and the Turks and the Armenians. ... We said firmly: 'You work together for the boss. You can stand together to fight for yourselves.'"

Flynn was instrumental in helping to organize the striker's children, many of whom were sent to New York, Philadelphia, and other cities during the strike to be cared for by strike supporters. She

was key in 1927, helping the women of Lawrence to participate and support the strike, against male prejudice and chauvinist attitudes.

Flynn was a vocal opponent of U.S. participation in World War I. She was a key leader in the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, two revolutionary workers' leaders who were put to death for their ideas and activities with the IWW, and because of the strong prejudices at the time against Italian immigrants in this country. She was a founding member in 1920 of the American Civil Liberties Union. Though in poor health, she remained a supporter of the struggles of US workers giving support to the West Coast Long Shore strike in 1934.

Flynn joined the American Communist Party in 1936, like many other militant workers of the time who had been inspired by the achievements of the Russian Revolution of 1917. But by the 1930s, the Russian working class had lost power and its state was taken over by a bureaucratic grouping tied to Joseph Stalin. Despite the leading role they played in many struggles, the communist parties of the world became in many ways rubber stamps for Stalin's policies, and took anti-working class positions in the US.

During the McCarthy period and Cold War and after World War II, there was an active government witch hunt against socialists, communists and other left militants in the unions. In 1951, Flynn was convicted with other members of the Communist Party under the Smith Act, accused of advocating the overthrow the US government by force and violence. A number of Communist Party members – including Flynn – were sent to prison. Flynn remained in prison for two years.

While Flynn clearly saw the nature of capitalism and opposed the system all of her life, she failed to recognize what had happened with the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. She was an elected leader of the Communist Party until her death in Moscow on Sept. 4, 1964.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was a very talented, courageous, and determined person who consciously chose the life of a militant. Despite her support of the Communist Party, she made major contributions to the workers' movement. In a period where women were relegated to

auxiliary roles at best, she was a leader on the front lines of the class struggle. She said: "History has a long-range perspective. It ultimately passes stern judgment on tyrants and vindicates those who fought, suffered, were imprisoned, and died for human freedom, against political oppression and economic slavery."

To learn more about Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, you can read her autobiography *The Rebel Girl*.



Speak Out Now

Revolutionary Workers Group

Where We Stand

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities: the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction – increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

The Force for Change Exists Today

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

We Stand for Socialism

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people – not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.

- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

Our Political Heritage

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

We Must Go Beyond Reforms

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism – be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people — wage and benefit cuts, attacks on health care, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

What Is Needed to Bring This Change About?

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

Who We Are

Speak Out Now/Revolutionary Workers Group is a revolutionary group. We believe that a socialist world is possible and can be brought into being by the active struggles of the majority of the people of the world. We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason, our group aims its activity primarily at large workplaces. Our newsletters are distributed at several workplaces every two weeks.

We think it is important to both analyze the current world situation as well as to know and understand the history of past struggles. We have forums on current events and political topics and a yearly weekend called the Revolutionary University. We organize Marxist discussions and classes. We have pamphlets on past working class struggles, the revolutionary movements around the world and the current problems we face. We organize with others around many issues – racism, immigrant rights, climate change, police brutality, and more.

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This pamphlet and other publications are available online:

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