

# What is Socialist Feminism?

By Jordan from Brighton

Feminism, in the popular understanding, is for very angry women with hairy legs, who feel hard done by because they are female, and don't feel that even now, in the twenty-first century, society treats them as equals. Broadly speaking, they are lesbians who hate men, and think the world would be better if it were ruled by women.

Since the 1990s, another idea of feminism has emerged: the feminism of micro-skirts and high heels, pneumatic busts, and cringe-worthy slogans like "girl power". According to this new 'feminism', the path to women's liberation is through using manipulative, feminine sexuality to get what we want, when we want it.

Of course these are both caricatures, and have little to do with the reality of the women's movement today – except that, when most people who do not consider themselves to be feminists hear the term, it is one of those stereotypes that springs to mind. As a result, the movement for women's liberation and social equality is often forced to define itself in terms of what it is not. Women's unions in universities across the UK hold meetings under the title "I'm not a feminist but...", and a



## WHO WAS SYLVIA PANKHURST?

By Jo from London

In History at school, we are often given very distinctive impressions of the women's suffrage movement – that there were two main groups, with two very different methods of gaining the women's vote:

Millicent Fawcett founded the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), a non-violent organisation which called itself 'suffragist'. And then, of course, the Pankhursts formed the Women's Social and Political Union.

glance around feminist blogs on the internet reveals hundreds of women banging on about the fact that they shave their legs.

This is a sorry situation, given that saying "I am a feminist" is basically just another way of saying, "I believe that all people should be equal, but I don't think we've got there yet", and that you support the struggle for women's equality.

As socialist feminists, we don't just fight for women's equality. We support strikes in workplaces, and community campaigns; we fight against immigration controls, and call for an end to deportations; we organise in trade unions, and we oppose all forms of capitalist and patriarchal oppression and exploitation.

Why? What's so 'feminist' about workplace struggles? It isn't necessarily obvious. However, if you look at the distribution of labour across sectors, it soon becomes obvious that far more women work part-time, or in low-paid jobs such as cleaners, shop workers and so on than men do. Although today most women work, we are still expected to do low-paid work at the same time as being the primary carers in the home - which means we still find it difficult to assert true financial independence from men.

Women, migrants, black people, homosexuals and other oppressed groups are all victims of the same oppression by a capitalist system which acts in the interests of a few very rich people, and uses everyone else as pawns to protect the interest of those few. We don't believe that people are born racist, sexist or homophobic, but that capitalist society teaches us those prejudices in order to divide us and prevent workers from organising as a class. As socialist-feminists, we believe that the only force capable of overthrowing capitalism and achieving the liberation of all oppressed groups.

It was these "suffragettes" who were renowned for extreme behaviour – arson attacks, hunger strikes, window-smashing, and the most famous incident in which a young woman, Emily Davison, threw herself under the King's Horse at the 1913 Epsom Derby.

This polarisation between the two campaign groups - strong pacifism in one, and radical violence in the other - creates a very black and white portrayal of the suffrage movement. But in fact, there were huge divides and splits in both organisations.

