

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

Margery Himel

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My image of the few women mentioned in history texts in school is completely one-dimensional. There's Betsy Ross, smiling at George Washington as she sews stars onto the flag...and Dolly Madison, the super-hostess, who saved the President's portraits from the burning White House.

I get furious now when I think about it. I never even noticed that women (not to mention non-white or working people) were practically non-existent in the history books. That is why I really became excited while reading the life of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a heroine of the American Labor Movement.

The "Rebel Girl," as she was nicknamed, was born in 1890 to Irish immigrants and spent most of her childhood in New York and New Hampshire. From the age of fifteen, she spent her time on trains, in strangers' homes, in factories and mines, in jail cells, and at rallies and meetings, speaking and organizing for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

The IWW is a union which believes that militant labor organizations can control their own working places.

Why, as a young woman, did Elizabeth choose to devote herself to this cause, rather than to the women's suffrage movement? Most women suffragettes were middle-class intellectuals. Elizabeth felt most strongly about the lives of working people. "We were horrified," she describes, "at the conditions...our neighbors, men and women, rushed to the mills before the sun rose, on cold winter days, and returned after dark. Many children were without underwear, even in the coldest weather; safety devices were unheard of...once, while we were in school, piercing screams came from the mill across the street. A girl's long hair had been caught in the unguarded machine and she was literally scalped."

Elizabeth grew up a socialist, and although she believed in women's right to vote, she was convinced that the "full opportunity for women to become free and equal citizens with access to all spheres of human endeavor cannot come under capitalism."

Although she did not work with suffragettes, she had a strong identity as a woman, which she learned at a young age from her mother.

"My mother admired women of intelligence who did 'worthwhile things' in the world. She rebelled against the endless monotony of women's household tasks. She was an excellent cook, but she hated what she called drudgery—washing, ironing, cleaning, dishwashing. Mama was no model housekeeper. She read widely—newspapers, magazines, and books. She was interesting and different and we loved her dearly." Her mother would never tolerate her calling people of different races and nationalities derogatory names, and always encouraged her to be critical and to be active.

When Elizabeth was fifteen years old, she was invited to speak at the Harlem Socialist Club. Her father was insulted that he had not been asked, so she decided to speak about something that he did not consider so important—"What Socialism Will Do For Women." She spoke of "the abolition of prostitution and of loveless, arranged marriages, the establishment of economic independence of women and the freedom of mothers from dependence on individual men, the social care of children, the right of every woman to an education, to work and to participate in

government; to be a wife, mother, worker, and citizen; to enter the arts and sciences and all the professions." She was fired with determination to fight for all this.

One of the most important struggles that Gurley Flynn engaged in was the Lawrence Strike of 1912. Lawrence, Massachusetts was a major textile center where 30,000 workers were employed in the woolen mills. These were men, women and children of at least twenty-five different nationalities. The strike came suddenly, on the first payday of the year. A law reducing the hours from 56 to 54 that women and children could work a week had been accompanied by the company cutting the pay proportionately.

Wages were already at the starvation point, ranging from \$6 to \$10.50 a week, and whole families had to work in order to survive. Pregnant women worked at the machines until a few hours before their babies were born.

The workers were enraged at the pay cut and closed the mills for three months. "Better to starve fighting than to starve working!" became their slogan.

Elizabeth helped to organize special meetings of women and children during the strike. She describes the situation: "The women worked in the mills for lower pay and in addition, had all the housework and care of the children too. The old-world attitude of man as the lord and master' was strong. At the end of the day's work or strike duty, the man went home and sat at ease while his wife did all the work preparing the meal, cleaning the house, etc. There was considerable male opposition to women going to meetings and marching on the picket line. We resolutely set out to combat these notions. The women wanted to picket. They were strikers as well as wives and were valiant fighters. We knew that to leave them at home alone, isolated from the strike activity, a prey to worry, affected by the complaints of tradespeople, landlords, priests and ministers, was dangerous to the strike..."

"We talked especially to the women about the high cost of living here—how; they had been fooled when they first came here, til they figured the dollars in their home money. They thought they were rich til they had to pay rent, buy groceries, clothes and shoes. Then they knew they were poor."

As the strike went on and even the skilled workers sulked out, Elizabeth and the other IWW's talked to the strikers of "One Big Union." They showed how all the differences between the workers are used by the bosses to keep the workers pitted against each other. The workers united around the strike demanding "Bread and Roses."

When they saw that the strikers were beginning to win, the company brought on the police and soldiers. On February 19, 1912, two hundred policemen with clubs charged 100 women marching on the picket line. A Boston newspaper described the scene: "A woman would be seen to shout from the crowd and run to a side street. Instantly, two or three police would be after her, usually a nightstick well-aimed brought the woman to the ground like a shot and instantly the police would be on her, pulling her in as many ways as there were police."

As the economic hardships got worse, the IWW and the Women's Committee of the Socialist Party organized brigades of children to be taken to other cities to be cared for. This plan was so successful in bringing the conditions of the strikers into the public's eye, that the textile owners had to smash it. On February 24, 1912, a group of children going to Philadelphia who had assembled with their parents at the railroad station, were suddenly attacked by police.

Children were clubbed and torn from their parents. Thirty-five women and children were beaten and thrown screaming and fighting into patrol wagons. The women were charged with neglect and improper guardianship, and ten children were taken to the Lawrence Poor Farm. The incident caused national uproar and disgust and a congressional hearing was held that exposed the conditions of the workers' lives to all of America.

On March 14, 1912 the Lawrence strike was settled. Wages were increased from 5% to 20%, there was increased compensation for overtime, and there was no discrimination against any worker who had taken part in the strike. Inspired by the Lawrence success, thousands of workers struck in other parts of New England.

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was with the IWW for 11 years. Later in her life she was one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1937 she joined the American Communist Party and became its first chairwoman in 1961. She died in 1964.

Late in her life she summed up her work this way: "Peace on earth, and an America free from poverty, exploitation, greed, and injustice—a socialist America. To this I have happily dedicated my life."

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