

CHAPTER
26

HISTORYMAKERS

Emmeline Pankhurst

Crusader for Women

Section 1

"I was fourteen years old when I went to my first suffrage meeting. . . . My mother [was] just setting out for the meeting, and I begged her to let me go along. . . . The speeches interested and excited me. . . . I left the meeting a conscious and confirmed suffragist."—Emmeline Pankhurst, My Own Story (1914)

Emmeline Pankhurst was the leading figure in the movement for women to win the right to vote in Great Britain. She fought for suffrage for several decades. In 1928, the year of her death, Pankhurst saw victory for the cause for which she had worked so hard.

Born in 1858, Emmeline Goulden was introduced to the suffrage movement by her mother. In 1879, she married Richard Marsden Pankhurst, who was himself committed to equal rights for women. In the late 1860s, he had written the first proposal for woman suffrage in Great Britain. He had also written a bill that gave married women property rights.

In 1889, Emmeline Pankhurst began the Women's Franchise League. This group campaigned for the right to vote and met some success. In 1894, Parliament passed a law that gave married women the right to vote in local elections. However, they were still barred from national elections. Beginning in 1895, Pankhurst herself won several races for local offices.

Pankhurst's most important work began in 1903, when she held a meeting of suffrage workers at her house. They decided to form the Women's Social and Political Union but limited its members to women only. The group adopted a motto that showed the spirit it would bring to the campaign. The slogan was "Deeds, not Words." Pankhurst immediately took action. Later that year, she attended a meeting between women and members of Parliament who said they supported the cause of woman suffrage. She stood up and challenged those politicians. She said that it was fine to say they were for woman suffrage, but they had to be willing to do something for it. She asked whether any were willing to introduce a bill, but none were.

The next year, the WSPU began its fight in earnest. One of Pankhurst's daughters and another woman were thrown out of a meeting of Britain's Liberal Party for disrupting it with their calls for suffrage. In later years, Pankhurst and the WSPU

campaigned against members of the Liberal Party, which then controlled the British government. WSPU disrupted party rallies and interrupted meetings. Many members of the group were thrown in jail; Pankhurst was jailed three times in 1908 and 1909.

In these years, seven different bills for woman suffrage met defeat in Parliament. As a result, the group turned even more aggressive. More than 100 women walked along the street of a shopping district in London and smashed store windows. Some set buildings on fire. When they were arrested, they went on hunger strikes. A new law allowed prisoners to be released when their health was suffering and then imprisoned again when it improved. It was aimed directly at the hunger strikers, and under this law Emmeline Pankhurst was released and put back in prison 12 times in one year.

When World War I began, the WSPU ended its militant campaign. The government released all prisoners from the movement, and the women devoted themselves to helping the war effort. This did more than anything else to win support for their cause.

In 1918, Parliament finally approved a bill giving women the right to vote. However, this was only a partial victory. The law gave the vote only to women 30 years of age or older. It was not until 1928 that the voting age for women was set at 21, as it already was for men. Pankhurst lived to see both of these successes. She died a few weeks after the 1928 vote.

Questions

1. **Evaluating Judgments** Why would the WSPU not admit men as members? Do you think that was a good idea? Why or why not?
2. **Perceiving Relationships** Compare and contrast the women's tactics before and during World War I. Which were more effective? Why?
3. **Using Context Clues** Explain what a hunger strike is and why people use the tactic.