

'Never Again?': Ellen Wilkinson's Clash and the Feminization of the General Strike

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'The most difficult lesson that the men have had to learn is that no class or nation can rise above the level of its women. (Ellen Wilkinson, *Plebs*, 1929)

The title of this article is taken from an article that Ellen Wilkinson wrote for the Marxist adult education journal *Plebs* in June 1926. This issue of *Plebs* was a special 'Strike Number' which tried to identify the lessons to be learned from the defeat of organized labour in the previous month. I shall return to Wilkinson's contribution to this analysis, but I have begun with 'Never Again?' because it conveys that peculiar tone of radical nostalgia that many on the left feel and have felt when contemplating this topic. The General or 'national' Strike was a catastrophe that nevertheless demonstrated, however briefly, a revolutionary potential for working-class control over history. In deciding what the events of May 1926 mean, we seek to extract this repressed emancipatory narrative from beneath the stubborn reality of the actual historical resolution of the struggle. This process involves the interrogation of the politics of representation: not only in terms of the organization of the labour movement and its relation to state power in May 1926, but also of the way the Strike has been constructed and contextualized by historiography and literary narrative.

As I will show in a moment, Wilkinson was in a particularly favourable position to mediate and creatively process the hermeneutics of the Strike – but her experience as a feminist and woman writer as well as a socialist and labour activist was bound to open up conspicuous faultlines in the 'workerist' mythology of the Strike, most notably in the way her novel *Clash* (1929) focalizes the events through a female hero. The extent to which this engendered replotting of class struggle runs the risk of deflecting or diluting the text's production of class consciousness (a risk I think she was entirely aware

of) is one of the problems I want to address in this article; in ‘feminizing’ the narrative of the Strike, I believe she wanted to validate women’s historical agency within a non-revolutionary socialist politics, while not mounting a wholesale feminist debunking of masculinist power and male ego. In other words, she had no interest in sectionalizing or over-intellectualizing her feminist critique of class; as a liberal socialist and humanist Marxist, she sees the emancipation of women as a fundamental but also advanced aspect of the struggle to overthrow capitalism. This reconciliation of the uneven historical development of class and gender politics is both urgently required and difficult to achieve, and the tensions are embodied and concretized in the experience of the novel’s heroine. Nowhere in *Clash* is it so reductively suggested that the Strike was lost because of the labour movement’s patriarchal organization, but the novel nevertheless invests much narrative energy and resourcefulness to make the case for writing women’s causes and subjectivities into the public sphere. This strategy includes the conventional counterpointing of public events against the difficult ‘personal’ choices facing the heroine in the romance plot, but the latter tradition is not seen as above or beyond politics. Indeed, one of the novel’s achievements is to show that socialism requires the transformation of social relations at all levels; in an egalitarian system ‘romance’ must also undergo redefinition if a new model of femininity is to emerge.¹

Placing the General Strike

The Virago reprints of *Clash* in 1989 (and before this, Storm Jameson’s 1936 novel *None Turn Back* in 1984) were particularly valuable for keeping the memory of 1926 alive (the fact that the only novels from the interwar period which deal substantially and directly with the Strike are by women is a remarkable and as yet unexplained feature of literary history). These reprints appeared at exactly the time when the British Tory Government’s repression of the labour movement was making any repeat of the event an impossibility, and consigning national labour militancy to the stuff of legend: a throwback to an earlier, ‘pre-modern’ phase of capitalism. The virtual silence about the General Strike in both the media and labour movement at the seventy-year mark in 1996 compares very unfavourably with the spate of historical studies during the period from the fifty-year mark in 1976 to the great miners’ strike of 1984–85.² Closer to the event, there was a predictable flurry of interest which occurred in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Most of these studies were written by labour movement and leftwing activists anxious to come to terms with the defeat and learn the correct lessons (Wilkinson collaborated on one such account, as we shall see). But considering its iconic status, and its well-authenticated existence as an historical event, the General Strike has been markedly under-represented in the cultural record. Its fate seems to be bound up with the poor showing in literary and cultural history

of the Twenties, particularly compared to its more vital big sister the Thirties (John Lucas's recent book *The Radical Twenties* (1997) is a welcome exception to this rule³); yet as a decade the Twenties is just as neatly or symbolically packaged as the Thirties: sandwiched between the end of the war and Wall Street Crash; or, more relevant for the theme of women's writing, the decade occupies the time between the two stages of the enfranchisement of women (1918 and 1928); or we can see the decade as expressing the decline in workers' power from the Councils of Action of 1919 to the election of the National Government in 1931. As Margaret Morris has pointed out, the memory and significance of 1926 has tended to be subsumed into the familiar iconography of the Thirties: poverty, unemployment, the Slump, and the rise of Fascism.⁴ But such a Thirties teleology can be misleading, as 1926 was also about the realization of a confrontation that had been threatened since the quasi-syndicalist labour disputes of 1911–14. As John Lucas says, 'the General Strike was inevitable. The only surprise was that it took so long to arrive'.⁵ Writing so close to the event, Wilkinson was not tempted like Storm Jameson to construct the Strike proleptically: in *None Turn Back* the ruling class have a marked predisposition towards fascistic thought and behaviour, and in one scene the Mosleyite figure Julian Swann even beats up one of the proletarian activists. The significant historical anchor point for *Clash* is the Georgian prewar period, evoked primarily through the memory of Suffragette agitation, but carrying with it the reverberations of generalized militancy (Wilkinson herself had been active in both the industrial and feminist spheres at this time). This method again contrasts with Jameson's novel, in which most of the characters have the memory of the Great War's violence fresh in their minds, but a specific women's history is absent. Moreover, Wilkinson was fully aware, long before the advent of modern literary theory, that history is constructed out of both memory and discourse. As she said in a review of two of the first books on the Strike, 'we are making history and writing about it as quickly as we make it'.⁶ *Clash* was Wilkinson's attempt to represent the Strike as a nexus of the twin determining forces of class and gender.

Few other writers took up this challenge in the interwar years. As Wilkinson said in a *Plebs* article in 1929, 'There has been as yet no great interpretative novel in English of working-class life.'⁷ Wilkinson was a strong advocate of working-class writing, and she may have found much to admire in the renaissance of (male) working-class fiction that emerged in the 1930s, but she would not have found a 'great interpretative novel' about the General Strike (Jameson's novel would be the only candidate for these laurels, but assessing its 'greatness' requires more space than is permissible here, and Jameson was not working class). The Strike figures in the background of stories by ex-miners: Harold Heslop's *The Gate of a Strange Field* (1929), Lewis Jones's *We Live* (1939), and Sid Chaplin's short story 'Easter 1927' (published in his collection *The Leaping Lad* in 1946). The Strike also appears

indirectly in some minor Dystopian narratives of the period, where the dominant tone is disenchantment and fear.⁸ Of course, this overwhelming sense of defeat may account for the lack of interest among working-class and left writers in revisiting the event. After all, where is the ‘great interpretative novel’ about 1848? Yet in ‘Never Again?’ Wilkinson followed Marx’s analysis of that great revolutionary year and applied it to 1926: where Marx argued that the ‘class struggles in France’ had actually clarified the revolutionary battleground of the modern bourgeois state, Wilkinson, while conventionally blaming the failure of the Strike on poor national leadership and preparation, believed it represented a unique opportunity to break the ‘hold that class collaboration formulas have on the workers’ minds’.⁹ Demystification of dominant ideology and the generation of class consciousness were classic socialist imperatives behind the urge to write or ‘make’ history.

Red Ellen

Wilkinson’s credentials made her well suited for this task, as her life (1891–1947) was transformed by education, the labour movement, and politics.¹⁰ She was working-class by origin (her father was a Manchester mill-worker turned insurance agent), and was successively a ‘scholarship girl’, a history graduate of Manchester university, a Suffragette speaker and recruiter, a union organizer for both the Co-op and the shopworkers’ union USDAW (in the First World War she had the job of trying to ensure that women doing men’s jobs were paid equal rates), a guild socialist, a long-standing member of the Labour Research Department, a founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (established in 1921) which she left when she became the only Labour woman MP in the transitory 1924 Labour government (she was heard to remark that male MPs had the knack of ‘being thoroughly nasty with perfect politeness’);¹¹ she was also on the Marxist-oriented *Plebs* Executive for many years.¹² From her days as a union activist she was always writing: initially for her union in-house journals and eventually for a wide range of labour, feminist and popular papers, including the *Daily Herald*, *Sunday Express* and Lady Rhondda’s *Time and Tide*. One of Wilkinson’s aspirations was to write fiction for those who would never read Marx,¹³ so it should not surprise us to find that *Clash* was serialized in the *Daily Express*. In the Thirties she became well known as the MP for Jarrow (she was elected in 1935), led the famous Jarrow March in 1936 and wrote the town’s angry obituary in 1939 as *The Town that was Murdered*. She became Minister for Education in 1945 and implemented the 1944 Education reforms. Though she was an elected Labour MP for Middlesbrough at the time of the General Strike (the official party position was to remain aloof from the dispute), she was in the thick of things. She and *Plebs* cartoonist Frank Horrabin were sent by the TUC on speaking tours of the north, where they gathered regional information for their *Plebs*-sponsored book on the

Strike, *A Workers' History of the Great Strike* (1927). This study is a fairly dry 'factual' account with minimal comment and no focus on the role of women, though the tone of the narrative is to salute the exemplary commitment of the workers and lament their betrayal by the TUC leadership who called off the Strike at the peak of its solidarity. One uplifting scene is sharply foregrounded: the granting of permits to travel, an image of proletarian control over the infrastructure, 'the cap-in-hand position reversed'.¹⁴ The Strike was precisely about testing the limits of what was 'permissible', and in *Clash* this disclosure includes an odyssey into the transformative outer regions of class and gender identity.

While *A Workers' History* chronicles the nine days of the Strike only, *Clash* extends the narrative to the subsequent six-month period of the miners' lock-out. The novel draws here on Wilkinson's experience as a fund-raiser for the miners (poor relief only went to the wives and dependants, which meant there was a real danger of starvation, and Wilkinson embarrassed the government by broadcasting this fact on a speaking tour in America). Such was her passionate commitment to the miners (and we must remember that the Strike was called to support the miners against pay cuts by the coal owners) that she embellished a speech in parliament by flourishing a miner's 'guss' or harness that was used to physically haul coaltubs underground. According to Wilkinson's biographer, these theatricals were ironically meant to evoke Edmund Burke's famous wielding of a dagger in one of his antijacobin speeches (if the heroine of *Clash* had been an MP, no doubt this scene would have found its way into the novel).¹⁵ So if the predominant feeling on the left was that the miners had been abandoned, Wilkinson made sure that in her career, and in her fiction, the miners were supported and remained at the centre of the class struggle.

Clash: Throwing Over the Old Codes?

Though she needed a heroine sufficiently mobile to cross over between conflicting social and sexual worlds, Wilkinson's choice seems at first glance rather lacking in plausibility. Joan Craig is a twenty-six-year-old northern organizer for the 'National Industrial Union of Labour' who also inhabits the fashionable world of bohemian Bloomsbury (she is patronised by the wealthy socialite and veteran Suffragist Mary Maud Meadows). The cultural geography of this division in Joan's life is both socially and sexually symbolic: the north is a place of 'grim' industrial reality, unrelieved patriarchy and duty to the cause; the seductive south a place of enlightened attitudes to gender, pleasure and high culture (there is an anticipation here of the symbolic national landscape of the Angry Young Man of the 50s, and a reworking of the notorious 'two nations' of the 1840s' industrial novel). We presume that before the Strike, Joan reconciled these two worlds by subordinating the south to the north, pleasure to duty. Her duty is her pleasure:

Personal contacts wearied her. Family or friends were carelessly shed if something exciting in the way of a strike or a good organizing row called her to any distant town.¹⁶

There are several ironies here. First, this construction of a career-woman independence seems overstated (to the point of seeming to be a masculinist sublimation), and we suspect (rightly) that ‘personal contacts’ will test her mettle in the course of the novel as the romance plot asserts itself. Second, these temptations are thrown up precisely by a ‘good’ strike and ‘organizing row’ – the crucial difference is that this ‘row’ takes place not in a ‘distant town’ but in London, the very site of the Pleasure Principle she is supposedly in control of. As history is made in the Memorial Hall in Farringdon, where the TUC took the decision to call the Strike, Joan becomes enmeshed in the contradictory pleasures and politics of her Bloomsbury ‘set’. The early chapters of the novel oscillate between the two locations of the spartan Methodist hall and luxurious West End. Some of these rapid transitions seem to beg the readers’ disapproval, though the narrative tone is disinterested. At one point Joan is whisked from the hall, where ‘the middle class was completely absent’ (46), to a lunch of omelettes and sherry in a Soho café. This bifurcation of her social identity involves much more than her meeting and having to discriminate between two upper-class suitors who join the cause for its romantic appeal (in Propp’s terms, Tony Dacre the writer is the false hero, Gerry Blain the wounded veteran is the true hero); as we shall see, her affair with Dacre is the entry point to a confrontation with the harsher realities of being an emancipated woman in the 1920s. By using some rather creaky plotting (Dacre’s involvement in the Strike, for instance, always lacks credibility beyond its ‘realistic’ purpose of lacking credibility) Wilkinson shows that the meanings of the Strike reverberate far beyond the walls of Memorial Hall, not just to ‘distant towns’, but to a revaluation of the idea of the independent woman.

The Strike has the paradoxical effect of initially lowering social and sexual barriers for those involved in the dispute (as in wartime) but also sharpening the antagonising, determining forces of property whenever the narrative comes up against the discourse of revolution. Likewise, the narrative of female emancipation which begins with that confident assertion of Joan’s autonomy begins to waver when it is confronted with its nemesis: the epistemological break. Having been permitted access to the highbrow world (where the least sympathetic woman character, Dacre’s wife Helen, is also an advocate of modernist theatre) Joan is faced with a painful theorization of her ‘lived’ ideology of independence. When Joan hears that Helen is prepared to help strike-breakers in order to raise funds for her latest production (Helen puts art before politics), Joan asks Dacre to intervene, but he is scathing about this appeal to his patriarchal authority:

'How can I? We're not in the Stone Age, and I'm not a cave-man. My wife earns her own income and lives her own life. I have no more influence over her than the next one.' (43)

This may be a rationalization, but the point sticks: Helen is a reactionary feminist, which is an uncomfortable disjuncture for Joan and the reader. The problem emerges: what is the new 'code' for social and gender relations in a state of equalized property? While Helen's 'own income' is partly inherited, the freedom it brings is analogous to the socialist aspirations of the labour movement. So Mary Maude's formulation of the dilemma of the modern woman also has a resonance for the meanings of the Strike:

'Whether we can stretch the old Victorian codes to fit, or whether we should throw codes over altogether, or whether the modern woman can evolve a new code.' (97-98)

Significantly, the 'old' codes include Suffragettism. This can be deduced not only from the fact that by 1926 the vote (for women over 30) has been won, but also because its representative Mary Maude (who was imprisoned for her militant activities) is a deeply compromised figure. She is a mine-owner herself and has only a sentimental attachment to the working class. She wants Joan to live up to her name (Joan of Arc, the patron saint of the Suffragettes) and become a martyr to the next stage of feminist progress, the conquest of the professions, even though this will mean abandoning Dacre and the possibility of marriage. But Mary Maude is also driven by jealousy, as she is in love with Dacre. So the feminist ideology of women's participation in the public sphere is represented as being deeply flawed by its bourgeois origins. This does not mean that the novel rejects entirely a narrative of feminist progress, but unless it can be reconciled to the ongoing struggle of the working class, the result will be an irresolvable 'muddle'. As we shall see, the novel finds a solution to this problem in a mildly sentimental retreat into unreconstructed 'Victorian' class-consciousness, though the nature and degree of Joan's surrender to this older class identity is debatable; the success of the novel's closure depends equally on how it represents the resolution of the narrative of the Strike.

The question of whether the 'codes' of feminine identity should be overthrown parallels the dilemma posed by the 'public' history of the Strike, whose faultline is constitutionality. The narrative constantly fetches up against the central contradiction of the Strike (articulated by numerous characters including Joan): without recourse to revolutionary action there is little prospect of victory, but insurrection will meet with a bloody response from the state (a scene of slaughtered workers mown down by machine guns is envisioned more than once in the novel). Moreover, leaving aside tactics on the ground, the Strike cannot be ascribed a political motivation without

risking the charge of seditiously undermining the elected government. But the language of a traditional trade dispute is clearly insufficient to express the apocalyptic significance of such an unprecedented collective action: 'you have placed your all upon the altar for this great Movement' says Ernest Bevin (61). The result of this *impasse* is that the Strike is both intensely full and tragically empty of meaning (Joan often oscillates between these two emotional states; see pp. 51–52). While liberal democracy's reliance on Whiggish, reformist gradualism is obviously clapped out, as it is clear things are about to get worse (the mine owners will demand pay cuts for a million miners), the labour movement (with the exception of the Communist Party, who are absent from the novel) cannot abandon constitutional machinery and ideology. Horrabin captured the irony of this situation in a series of cartoons used on the front covers of *Plebs* in 1926: a huge elephant named Labour refuses to tread on a tiny pea called The Constitution. Yet the image of the state in *Clash* is ambiguous: the government is shown as a 'broker' between the mine-owners (Capital) and the unions (Labour), but there are obvious and sinister contradictions in this arbiter's role. The EPA (Emergency Powers Act) and OMS (Order for the Maintenance of Supplies) were in place before the Strike began; Joan muses that the OMS 'had all the powers of the state without any of its inconvenient constitutional checks' (59). In reality, the Tory government did not need to mobilize all its volunteers (or troops) as the Strike collapsed after only nine days, though there were around 3,000 arrests for 'seditious' activities. All the government had to do was call the TUC's bluff. When Joan ponders why all the 'fine stuff' of the working class is being wasted, language fails her: 'instead ... muddle' (51).

Yet the novel does not entirely endorse this *Hard Times* fudge of the issues, foregrounding contradiction but unable to move beyond it. Far from merely 'muddling' through, Joan's activism leads her to discover some emergent radical female types who are not contaminated by bourgeois property. There is a fellow organizer Beryl Gaye, for example, once a 'notorious suffragette' but now a Labour candidate who 'remained a woman' (114). While 'remained a woman' is a vague phrase, Beryl's example is an eye-opener for Joan, whose only acquaintance with feminine 'difference' has been in Bloomsbury. As a union activist she has lived quite amenable among men; Joan sees nothing amiss in having to be smuggled into Memorial Hall at the beginning of the novel, where she describes Ernest Bevin as a 'Napoleon' (60). Close contact with women is actually a novelty. This new-found intimacy (a feminization of her own experience) deepens in the harrowing period she spends aiding miners' wives in their relief work. The novel provides plenty of evidence here for seeing working-class women's experience as the quintessence of alienation and class-consciousness. Men are almost entirely absent and eventually Joan begins to feel sorry for their marginalization and emasculation. Miners' wives are not mere victims, and the Strike has clearly both mobilized and intellectually emancipated many working-class women. Joan meets politi-

cized 'simple working women' (239), including a *Plebs*-educated wife who initiates a discussion of birth control (a cause Wilkinson supported) and takes a hostile line on the men: 'Do 'em good. The men are too uppish anyway. Let 'em see what we have to put up with for a change' (264). This declaration of independence again marks the limits of Joan's and the novel's vision of women's social liberation. While the point made is undoubtedly a valid one, Joan's own experience personifies the ideological trap of social mobility; as *Plebs* consistently argued, bourgeois culture is not the 'answer' to sexual inequality but is part of the problem.¹⁷ Joan's constitutional politics cannot extend to female separatism, which is in any case tainted by the example of Helen Dacre. She has no desire to split from the labour movement which is her true home (Joan's family is absent from the narrative, as if sacrificed to her cause). So Joan acts decisively if not radically: she renounces her bourgeois, 'southern' life and takes up with Blain, the war hero who has by now proved that he has genuinely 'gone over' to the other side.¹⁸ Joan has also begun to write, but there is no suggestion that this will be an alternative career. The master-narrative remains that of class, energized by a new commitment to gender equality.

The artistic achievement of *Clash* is its ability to turn a naturalistic narrative into 'a site of transformative socialist-feminist politics'.¹⁹ We should not expect the text to tie up all the loose ends, as history is still wrestling with the tensions between class and gender identity. *Clash* opens up the problems of finding a female subjectivity which can meet the challenges posed by the general emancipation of labour (the Utopian potential of the Strike) and the growing independence of newly enfranchised women.

Notes

1 For a substantial treatment of Wilkinson's reworking of romance motifs and romance ideology, see: P. Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890–1945* (Durham and London, 1994), pp. 85–89, 169–76; M. Joannou, 'Reclaiming the Romance: Ellen Wilkinson's *Clash* and the Cultural Legacy of Socialist-Feminism' in D. Margolies and M. Joannou (eds), *Heart of the Heartless World: Essays in Cultural Resistance in Memory of Margot Heinemann* (London, 1995), pp. 148–61. While I am indebted to both of these feminist studies for their illumination of the novel's politicization of the 'personal', my own emphasis is more specifically on exploring Wilkinson's choice of the General Strike as the arena for an emancipatory narrative of femininity.

2 A search of the British Library OPAC shows only a handful of studies published after 1990, the most notable being K. Laybourn, *The General Strike of 1926* (Manchester, 1993).

3 See J. Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, Culture* (Nottingham, 1997). Lucas argues that the Strike was 'the definitive moment for the 1920s' (p. 4) which sharpened class antagonisms and therefore had a major influence on the ideological climate of reform which led to the election of a Labour government in 1945. Lucas's examination of *Clash* owes much to Joannou, though he does usefully single

out the novel's construction of an image of England premised on working-class not genteel culture (pp. 238–43).

4 See M. Morris, *The General Strike* (1976; London, 1980), chapter 14. See also Raymond Williams's brief but moving essay 'The Social Significance of 1926' (1977), reprinted in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London, 1989), pp. 105–110.

5 Lucas, *The Radical Twenties*, p. 149. See also J. Stevenson, *British Society 1914–45* (Harmondsworth, 1986), pp. 196–99.

6 See *Plebs*, December 1926, pp. 450–51.

7 *Plebs*, November 1929, p. 247.

8 See Lucas, *The Radical Twenties*, chapters 5 and 7.

9 *Plebs*, June 1926, p. 213.

10 See B. D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson 1891–1947* (London, 1982), and her Introduction to the Virago reprint of *Clash*. See also T. A. Lockett, *Three Lives* (London, 1968).

11 Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 79.

12 *Plebs* was the intellectual organ of National Council of Labour Colleges, the Marxist rival to the WEA or Workers' Educational Association. Wilkinson's union USDAW was one of the many unions affiliated to *Plebs*, whose residential Labour College in London coincidentally educated both Harold Heslop and Lewis Jones. For an interesting discussion of the cultural role of *Plebs* and the NCLC see Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke, Chris Weedon, *Rewriting English: The Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (London, 1985), chapter 3: 'Fiction as Politics: Working-Class Writing in the Inter-War Years'.

13 *Plebs*, May 1926, p. 179.

14 R. W. Postgate, E. Wilkinson and J. F. Horrabin, *A Workers' History of the General Strike* (London, 1927), p. 35.

15 Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson*, p. 90.

16 Ellen Wilkinson, *Clash* (London, 1989), p. 11. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets.

17 See the discussion in Batsleer *et al.*, *Rewriting English*, pp. 52–54.

18 According to Pamela Fox, this alliance is at the expense of sexual fulfilment: 'Joan in effect accomplishes her martyrdom' (*Class Fictions*, p. 175).

19 Joannou, 'Reclaiming the Romance', p. 158.