

WILPF and The Clapham Film Unit present

These Dangerous Women

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Isabella Ford
1855–1924

By Sara Baradour and Gillian Lawrence

“Fight against every form of conventional thought”

Ford came from a privileged and extremely wealthy Quaker background. Her father was a landowner and a solicitor who ran a night school for girls who worked in the Leeds Mills. When she was sixteen, Ford began to teach classes at the school.

Ford began campaigning for better working conditions for tailoresses in 1889 and marched with the workers from the Manningham Mills in Bradford which was the greatest producer of silk in the United Kingdom. The strike, which lasted for nineteen weeks, came about when Lister, the owner, tried to implement a reduction in wages.

It would be interesting to know whether Isabella’s socialist activities had an effect on her relationship with her father, the landowner. It is known however, that she and her sisters had strong views about the rights of the working classes and that they believed that the way to help their plight was through united forces.

According to the Leeds Socialist Party “the strike revealed that the wider working class needed greater strength and unity then, not only industrially, but politically as well. Within a month of the dispute, the Bradford Labour Union was formed, and eighteen months later, the Independent Labour Party was formed in Bradford in January 1893.”

Isabella Ford was elected a life member of the Leeds Trades and Labour Councils; was president of the Tailoresses Union; helped set up the Leeds Independent Labour Party (ILP); and was elected a parish councillor in Leeds. She believed earnestly that change for women’s working and life conditions could only come about through their own fight and that they should “fight against every form of conventional thought... particularly among the women themselves”. (*Women’s Trade Union Review*, January 1900). She dismissed the do-gooding interference by philanthropists who had no vision of a different life for working women.



In 1903 Ford became the first woman to talk to what became the British Labour Party.

During World War I there was disagreement within the Women's movements about the use of force towards the enemy and Ford was one who proposed ceasefire.

John Simkin, writing in Spartacus Educational, concludes: "As the war went on Isabella found herself more and more isolated and in 1915 was forced to resign from the executive committee of the NUWSS. For the rest of her life, Ford concentrated her efforts helping the peace movement. In the years, 1919–1922 Ford was a delegate to the Women's International League Congress".¹

¹ Simkin, John. Isabella Ford, Spartacus Educational online <http://spartacus-educational.com/Wford.htm> (accessed 5 May 2015)

