

Review: Siobhan Brown, *A Rebel's Guide to Eleanor Marx*

Hazel Norton



Siobhan Brown, *A Rebel's Guide to Eleanor Marx* 2014
Bookmarks £3.00

Eleanor Marx (1855 - 1898) was the youngest daughter of Karl Marx but she was also so much more than just Marx's daughter. She was passionately dedicated to the struggle of the working class a gifted organiser, a fighter for women's liberation and an inspirational figure in the movement. From the Paris Commune to her role in the 1880s new-unionism, Eleanor campaigned vigorously to highlight that the strength of both men and women workers lies in the unification of their struggles. She applied all of her life's experience and became an important player in times of rapid change.

In an age of repression and recession, Eleanor had a vision of a socialist society where the working class could organise and take control of their own lives. She witnessed first hand the widening gap between the rich and the poor. While the bourgeoisie expanded their mansions the

labourers were pushed further into the depths of the slums. On the years leading up to the late 1880s, Eleanor described the working class as 'if not dead, at least in a profound asleep'. The time was ripe for new ideas and Eleanor delivered.

In this small booklet Siobhan Brown, gives a very detailed account of Eleanor's activities in a limited amount of space. The book is exactly as it is titled; it is a 'Guide' to Eleanor Marx. It describes all the trials and tribulations of the time, and how Eleanor was a driving force in the socialist movement. Brown doesn't delve much into Eleanor's personal life. This is obviously a conscious decision, given the book's physical limitations but she gives the reader a foundation to build on and leaves some questions open for further investigation, for which the author does supply a list for further reading.

Why is this book and Eleanor's story relevant today? Through the many strikes and campaigns Eleanor worked on, she showed how the more militant the strike the more chance the workers had of making real gains.

In 1884 she also met Clementina Black, a painter and trade unionist, and became involved in the Women's Trade Union League. She would go on to support numerous strikes including the Bryant & May ('Matchgirls') strike of 1888 and the London Dock Strike of 1889 (for 'the dockers' tanner').

She also helped organize the gas workers who won their demand for an eight our day without having to go on strike. We can see here the beginning of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers and of the Silvertown Women's

Union, in both of which Eleanor a key role.

This wave of strikes known as the New Unionism transformed the trade union movement in Britain bringing about the mass organisation of previously unorganised unskilled workers and laying the foundations for the later mighty Transport and General Workers Union (today's Unite). It showed that the way unions recruit and are built is in and through struggle (rather than by slowly and passively recruiting and only going into struggle later).

This a lesson which applies very strongly to the trade union movement in Ireland where participation in social partnership, the Croke Park and Haddington Rd deals and a rotten leadership loyal to the Labour Party have severely both the unions themselves and their role in the wider resistance to austerity.

So we have seen Public sector workers protest in 2010 reach numbers of up to 200,000 but with the Union leaders failing to follow through on any further action. We've seen the Greyhound workers

locked out for 16 weeks and being threatened with injunctions while the union bureaucracy stood by and failed to deliver meaningful solidarity.

As well as being active with the trade unions Eleanor Marx also played a significant role in socialist politics helping to organise the International Socialist Congress in Paris in 1885 and being involved at different times with the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League and the Independent Labour Party.

Eleanor was a woman of many talents writing *The Woman Question* with her partner, Edward Aveling, giving lectures on the poet Shelley, and translating Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and four of Ibsen's plays. Her early death by suicide at forty three - probably as a result of her treatment by Aveling - was a tragic loss to the movement.

Siobhan Brown's little book is an excellent introduction to the life and work of this fascinating socialist pioneer and I would strongly recommend it.