Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

IWW Activist, Founder of the ACLU, and US Communist Party Chairwoman

(1890 - 1964)

Description: At the age of 17 she became a full time organizer for the IWW, and was consequently arrested 10 times. Although she was never convicted of any criminal activity, she was forced to leave the IWW in 1916 because of internal conflicts. In 1920 she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union, and began actively supporting Sacco and Vanzetti... (From: Spartacus Educational Bio)

Tags: iww, american civil liberties union, american, communist, labor unionist, activist, feminist, reproductive liberty.

Quotes:

"...how they inspired us, how we revered them. French Communards, Russian revolutionists escaped from Siberia, Germans driven out by Bismarck, Garibaldians in their red shirts, Irish, Polish exiles. Oldtime Americans marching, telling of Haymarket, Homestead, Pullman. Men who knew Marx, Engels, Silvis, Parsons – patriarchs and prophets to us." (From: Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 1939.)

"'The right to assemble; the right to speak' written in dead words in the Bill of Rights was written in live deeds by the people all over the United States."
"Defense of our civil liberties; for political prisoners; fighting against raids, wholesale arrests, and deportations of thousands of foreign-born workers - these were the big issues of 1918 and 1919. The boss class was terrified by the great Russian Revolution." (From : Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory, 1939.)

Biography :

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn was one of the most influential labor organizers of the early 20th century, and was the first female leader of the Communist Party. She lived a colorful life full of success and failure both in her professional and personal life, and dedicated her life to helping the working class. She was born on August 7, 1890 in Concord, New Hampshire. Her parents were socialist Irish immigrants, and raised her in an atmosphere of radical political consciousness. They moved to the South Bronx when she was 10, and at age 17 Flynn gave her first political speech while in high school, "What Socialism Will do for Women". The speech, her first foray into the world of socialist activities, caused her to be expelled from school.

Flynn became a prominent figure in labor organization, and after giving her first speech, began organizing for the IWW. Her first major involvement was in the Lawrence Textile Strike in 1912, which began when the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, MA reduced the wages of its workers. This prompted a strike and the IWW quickly aided workers in demanding wage increases, overtime and a set-hour workweek. Flynn, Bill Haywood, and Carlo Tresca all arrived to lead the organization of the strike.

Soon, violence and controversy erupted as dynamite was planted, and blamed on the workers. It later came out that William Wood, the president of the American Woolen Company, had bribed the culprit in order to discredit the IWW. The conflict escalated to the point that the governor of Massachusetts sent in the state militia,
increasing the level of violence. During one protest, a militiaman killed a 15-year old boy, and soon after Anna LoPizzo, a female striker, was killed. Though a fellow striker was charged with her murder, the union claimed that it had been a police officer. Overall, however, the demonstration was a success for Flynn and the IWW, as the company agreed to all demands in March of 1912.

Nearly a year later, in January of 1913, workers walked out of the Doherty Silk Mill in Paterson New Jersey when four employes were fired for trying to organize a meeting with managers of the company. The dispute quickly expanded to strikes among 300 mills in the town, and the IWW came in to organize. Again, Flynn, Haywood and Tresca were lead organizers, and Flynn set up weekly meetings for women only on the issues. Flynn wrote in Rebel Girl of her experience in Paterson:

"Sunday after Sunday, as the days became pleasanter, we spoke there to enormous crowds of thousands of people --- the strikers and their families, workers from other Paterson industries, people from nearby New Jersey cities, delegations from New York of trade unionists, students and others. Visitors came from all over America and from foreign countries. People who saw these Haledon meetings never forgot them...." (Flynn, 165-166)

While the strike was more peaceful than Lawrence had been, 3,000 people were arrested and 2 people killed by private detectives. In the end, there was not enough funding to keep the strike going, and in July of 1913 the workers had to submit to the companies or starve.

After Paterson, Flynn continued to organize restaurant workers, silk weavers, garment workers and miners. She was arrested many times during this period, but never convicted. In 1920 she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union, and began actively supporting Sacco and Vanzetti, women's rights, birth control, and women's suffrage. She also criticized the leadership of trade unions for being male-dominated and not reflecting the needs of women. She also became romantically involved with Carlo Tresca, a relationship that lasted nearly 13 years until he betrayed her with Flynn's younger sister (Buhle, American Historical Association, 1996). This led to a ten-year mental breakdown, during which Flynn did not work.
The relationship between Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Carlo Tresca was significant not only for the two of them personally, but was an important alliance in the anarchist and labor world. They met while organizing, as Flynn at the young age of 22 was rapidly gaining a reputation for her labor leadership. Once the two became involved, Tresca left his previous mistress to live with Flynn's family. In *Carlo Tresca, Portrait of a Rebel*, Pernicone wrote, "For the next twelve years, Tresca and Flynn represented the most important male/female alliance among radicals in the United States, surpassing Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, whose intimate relationship had ended years earlier" (Pernicone, 74). During their relationship, both were extremely productive professionally. Both were instrumental in organizing the Paterson strike, and both put on trial for inciting rioting --- although both also were acquitted. In 1914, the Ludlow Massacre on April 20 caused Tresca a considerable amount of anguish, as many colleagues and labor agitators were killed. A few months later, three anarchists attempted to bomb Rockefeller's home, but were killed when the dynamite erupted prematurely in their apartment (Pernicone, 91).

This event exposed certain distinct differences between Flynn and Tresca's political stances. Flynn, a socialist, was very opposed to violence and did not agree with the anarchists' methods of violent revolution at the time. Tresca, an anarcho-syndicalist on the other hand, believed in the necessity of violence for revolution, but not in singular bombings or assassinations. Though they often worked together on issues and in protests, Flynn wrote, "My life with Carlo was tempestuous, undoubtedly because we were both strong personalities with separate and often divided interests" (Flynn, 333).

Flynn was very critical also of the Italian anarchist community in which Tresca lived and worked, especially because it was so male dominated. While she complained that in the homes of these Italians, the women were always cooking in the background, Tresca's daughter also reported that Flynn "Never got off her fat behind to help" (Pernicone, 83). Their relationship was also plagued by Tresca's near constant infidelities.

Tresca became very disillusioned with the United States labor movement by 1920, having dealt with imprisonment, and the pressure that both he and Flynn felt as the
Red Scare picked up momentum. Then, when Sacco and Venzetti were imprisoned, he became extremely active in the fight to save them. Flynn was also very active and as a non-Italian, was often needed as a facilitator for Tresca. When the two men were convicted and sentenced in 1921, the relationship was on the rocks between Flynn and Tresca. They split in May of 1925 when Tresca had a child by her sister. However, their parting is not well documented.

After their breakup, Flynn became very ill and moved to Portland, OR for ten years, during which time she was not active politically or in labor. In 1936, she joined the Communist Party and became an active organizer for them. In 1948 she was arrested and imprisoned under the Smith Act for advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government. In 1961, she became the first woman national chairperson for the CP, and died on a visit to the Soviet Union in September of 1964. She was given a state funeral in Red Square, and her ashes were buried in Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago, close to several other labor organizers.

During the Second World War she played a vital role in the campaign for equal economic opportunity and pay for women and the establishment of day care centers for working mothers. In 1942, Flynn ran for Congress in New York and received 50,000 votes. In 1951, she was arrested for supporting those who were advocating the overthrow of the government, and spent two years in a federal prison. After her release from prison, Flynn resumed her political activism. She became national chairperson of the Communist Party of the United States in 1961. She made several visits to the Soviet Union and died while there on September 5, 1964, at 74 years old.

Sources:


From: Anarchy Archives.

**Works:**

Author of Sabotage (September 30, 1916)
Author of Do You Believe in Patriotism? (February 29, 1916)
Author of The Minnesota Trials (December 31, 1916)
Author of Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory (November 30, 1938)
Author of Defend the Civil Rights of Communists! (November 30, 1939)
Author of May 1st: The Sun of Tomorrow (May 06, 1941)

**Chronology:**

- **August 07, 1890:** Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Birth Day.
- **September 05, 1964:** Elizabeth Gurley Flynn's Death Day.

**Links:**

- **Anarchy Archives: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn**
  [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/flynn/index.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/flynn/index.html)

- **Wikipedia: Elizabeth Gurley Flynn**