This is a summary of some key movements in British history. It is by no means exhaustive and doesn’t do justice to the struggles covered, in that we can’t describe them in the detail they deserve, but it does point to moments in time when change has occurred for the better, and identifies possible lessons for those of us fighting for progressive change today.

1: CHARTISM

Ordinary people daring to make demands for radical democratic reform

Chartism was a political movement that arose in the 1840s in response to the profound changes Britain had been through in the industrial revolution, which had created large urban concentrations of working poor for the first time. Despite these numbers of urban labourers, the country was still run in the undemocratic, corrupt way it had been before industrialisation, and the vast majority of people could not vote. Chartism’s demands were very radical for the time, but had the support of huge numbers of people.

The Charter on which the movement derived its name called for six political or constitutional concessions:

- The vote for all men of 21 years of age and older
- The ballot - for the security of the vote (in effect, an anti-corruption measure)
- No property qualifications for MP candidates - anyone could stand for Parliament, not just the rich
- Salaries for MPs - which didn’t exist at the time, but was required if working class people were going to be able to stand for Parliament
- Equal constituencies - each MP to represent an approximately equal number of voters (an end to corrupt practices such as the infamous ‘rotten boroughs’)
- Annual parliaments - so that if an MP broke their election promises they could be fairly quickly removed
A Chartist gathering at Kennington Common, South London

Chartists organised huge rallies across the country, and on the back of these were able to present to Parliament the biggest petitions in British history for these demands.

By 1848, Chartism was in decline and by the early 1850s it had lost much of the dynamism and vitality it had possessed, and it petered out. But you will see that of the demands, all but five are now the law. The one that has never been realised is for annual parliaments, which still strikes me as a good idea! You will also note that it does not call for democratic rights for women. This was a major point of argument within the movement. Many of the most radical women were active in the Chartists, and compared to the second half of the 19th century they played a significant role in the political left and the trade unions.

It's significance was in being a mass movement where ordinary working class people, in alliance with middle class radicals, made political – not just industrial – demands on the establishment. They employed a variety of tactics, principally the mass petition, but also inspired armed uprisings, most famously in Newport in South Wales in 1839.
2: THE SUFFRAGETTES

A militant movement that split over how systemic it should be

The popular, often disparaging, perception of the movement for votes for women is of wealthy high society women campaigning for the vote as a hobby in their spare time. But there was a section of the suffragettes much neglected by later story-telling, and it had mass appeal amongst working class women. Its epicentre was in East London and led by, amongst others, Sylvia Pankhurst.

Sylvia rose to prominence as a leader of the Women’s Social and Political Union, who engaged in campaigns of widespread civil disobedience, arson and vandalism from their formation in 1900 onwards. They encouraged supporters to smash the windows of government and political party buildings and police stations, occupy streets around Parliament and interfere with establishment events. Many suffragettes during this period were jailed and responded with a campaign of hunger strikes, leading to the Cat and Mouse Act passed by the Liberal party in 1913. This allowed police to release suffragettes and reimprison them after they had eaten and regained some strength. Women activists responded by going on the run, or travelling in disguise. An example of the militancy of the women’s movement at this time was the tragic death of leading suffragette activist Emily Wilding Davison, who ran out in front of the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby in 1913, during the introduction of the Cat and Mouse Act.

The offices of the East London suffragettes
The tactics of this time were characterised by escalation. Mass demonstrations (of up to 750,000 women on one occasion in Hyde Park) and petitions were ignored by the government, giving way to innovative stunts, widespread direct action and causing damage to property. The reaction of the ruling elite was to employ violent and repressive retaliation, which in turn was met by the movement taking even greater risks.

Increasingly, however, the approach of the WSPU assumed that middle class women should advocate on behalf of the overwhelming majority of women, who were working class. Sylvia Pankhurst rejected this, and sought to link up the campaign for the vote with broader social and economic struggles. The experiences of working class women at the beginning of the twentieth century were manifestly unjust. They made the campaign for the vote relevant to working class women’s daily concerns, which included the high cost of rent, a desire for better housing conditions, and opposition to widespread sexual harassment and low pay in the workplace.

Sylvia Pankhurst closely allied her movement, based in the crowded slums of East London, with the struggles of the labour movement. Her decision to share a stage with Irish trade union leader Jim Larkin in 1912 provoked strong criticism from her mother Emmeline, and her sister Christabel, leaders of the national WSPU. Additionally, Sylvia and the East London Federation of Suffragettes were avowedly anti-racist, which was another massive challenge to the elites at this time. The paper of the East London suffragettes, the Woman’s Dreadnought, was the first in Britain to employ a Black journalist. Given this, those parts of the suffragette movement which were more inclusive and wanted to join with other progressive social causes won widespread and mass support amongst many women of all classes, and some men.

But the final straw that led to the formal split in the suffragette movement was World War One. The WSPU, led by Sylvia’s family, took an ardent position in favour of the war, and joined recruitment tours encouraging men to enlist in the army. Critically, they ceased their agitation for women’s votes in order to support the war effort. But the East London Federation of the WSPU, led by Sylvia, took a different tack altogether and opposed the war. They helped in the organising of anti-war rallies, encouraged women to join the movement and reject the case for war and used their newspaper, the Women’s Dreadnought, to make the anti-war case. This led to their expulsion from the WSPU and they formed a new organisation that same year, the East London Federation of Suffragettes. This new organisation continued to demand votes for women but widened the scope of their cause to encompass struggles against the war and in defence of conscientious objectors, for workplace battles for decent pay and against racism.

Following the war, and the vital contribution of women to the British war effort (combined with international developments such as the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917), it was no longer possible to deny women their formal political rights. In 1919, women over the age of 30 won the right to vote for the first time. The movement for women’s suffrage must be seen in the context of the wider political instability that characterised the first quarter of the twentieth century in Britain, and the serious political differences and tactical approaches within that movement shouldn’t be
denied, not least because they offer us today a host of lessons for our own movement-building - who our movements rest on, who they speak for, who they empower and how our struggles can and must be joined with broader campaigns for social and economic justice.

3. KINDER SCOUT

Direct action winning working class people access to the countryside

The mass trespass on to Kinder Scout in 1932 has been labelled by many as the most successful instance of direct action in British history.

In the 1930s national parks did not exist as they do today. The vast majority of the countryside was off limits to ordinary people: owned by the aristocracy who had been unjustly awarded the land in previous centuries and guarded from trespassers by their gamekeepers. It was forbidden for working class people to visit these areas. One such area is Kinder Scout in Derbyshire, where minor trespasses by rambling workers were often met with violence from the local landowners.

The situation came to a head when a number of men and women decided to converge on Kinder Scout in a preplanned trespass, or temporary occupation, of the land. The day that was chosen for
the action, 24 April 1932, was meticulously planned. It was led by volunteers, men and women in the trade union movement on either side of the Pennine hills, those living in the industrial heartlands around Manchester and Sheffield. They were joined by Communist party supporters, who organised at the time as the British Workers' Sports Federation.

On the day, over 400 ramblers from Manchester and a smaller number from Sheffield travelled to the area, where they were met with police who aggressively attempted to contain and disperse the crowd. Eventually the police were overwhelmed, and the ramblers broke through and marched towards Kinder, singing socialist songs such as the Internationale.

"Arise ye workers from your slumbers
Arise ye prisoners of want
For reason in revolt now thunders
And at last ends the age of cant.
Away with all your superstitions
Servile masses arise, arise
We'll change henceforth the old tradition
And spurn the dust to win the prize!"

After converging at the bottom so that leaders could explain the intended route to the top, the group set off, stayed a while on the hill, then returned to Hayfield (the village at the bottom of Kinder Scout), where the police were waiting. Five protesters were arrested on the spot, and many eyewitnesses attest to the apparent racial profiling of the police, as only Jewish trespassers were arrested. One of the leaders of the group played the role of press officer, ensuring the police behaviour received coverage in the Manchester press. The subsequent trials of the trespassers, intended to intimidate and subdue the movement, backfired: they received national press coverage and sympathy from large sections of the population.

Direct action wasn't the only tactic used. More moderate supporters of the 'right to roam' didn't participate in the trespass but afterwards incorporated it into their tactics. For example, the Ramblers' Association, who sought to lobby and influence the government for a change in the law used the spectre of more mass trespasses as an argument that concessions needed to be made sooner rather than later. In this way, the movement wasn't narrow either in terms of the organisations who led it, the tactics they adopted. Nor was it supported by only a narrow set of political and ideological approaches.

Instead, far from being seen as a 'single issue campaign', for many of the working class participants of the Kinder Scout trespass in 1932, the question of ownership of land was linked to wider social and economic problems they were experiencing in their everyday lives. 1932 was a time of desperate poverty and unemployment for ordinary people, who were living through the worst depression (at the time) in modern history.
In 1949 - in part as a result of the movement the 1932 trespass launched - the reforming post-war Labour government introduced a national parks act which made Kinder Scout and the land around it the first national, government administered park, open for all the public to use and enjoy.

**4: ANTI-FASCISM AND THE BATTLE FOR CABLE STREET**

Migrant communities and the left joining to defeat the politics of hate

Living in Britain in the 1930s was for most people a pretty desperate experience. The great depression had meant unemployment had skyrocketed and poverty was rife. The situation facing Britain’s many and varied immigrant communities were compounded by systematic, institutional and daily racism. Much of this was directed against Britain’s Jewish community, which had increased in number from the beginning of the twentieth century as Eastern European Jews fled anti-semitic pogroms. These Jewish migrants had settled mostly in East London but there were also sizeable communities in Manchester and Leeds, and elsewhere.
In the 1930s the most obvious physical threat to the Jewish community in Britain was the rise of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), led by Oswald Mosley. Mosley was inspired by Mussolini in Italy and to a lesser extent Hitler. The BUF adopted increasingly anti-semitic rhetoric, demonising and scapegoating Britain's Jewish population for the economic problems the country faced. At first, Oswald's strategy was to cultivate establishment support. He projected an image of the BUF as a respectable middle class organisation, and this approach won him considerable financial backing from the rich and big business. The centrepiece tactic of his strategy was large rallies around the country, where thousands came to hear his denunciations of Black and Jewish people, and socialism, and speak in glowing terms about life in Fascist Italy. These rallies received glowing coverage in the Daily Mail and other mainstream newspapers sympathetic to the BUF's far-right message.

But in 1935 an audacious direct action stunt completely derailed Mosley's strategy and forced him to change tack. The BUF had organised a huge rally at the Olympia in West London in June 1934. Anti-fascists planned a response and infiltrated the meeting by applying for tickets advertised in the Daily Mail. Then, interspersed throughout the 12,000 people who filled the vast hall and one by one, loudly heckled Mosley during his keynote speech. Mosley's thugs, the blackshirts, soon managed to get hold of some of these protesters and not only ejected them onto the street, but then savagely attacked them. This was witnessed by various people, including some of the 2,000 anti-fascists protesting outside, but also journalists, who covered the episode in their reports of the meeting the next day. Such brutal violence had an immediate impact, leading many who thought themselves respectable to end their support for Mosley.

After that, Mosley decided that the BUF needed a new strategy based on physical confrontation and intimidation of Britain's Jewish community, and East London was his primary target. In 1936 the BUF announced they would march into the Jewish East End.

Many Jewish people at that time were active in community politics and in the general politics of the left, and many thousands were supporters of the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party or the Communist Party. The response to Mosley's march was one of the largest political mobilisations of the Jewish community in history, though views on what tactics should be adopted varied. The Labour party called a counter demonstration some miles away in Trafalgar Square, though many who attended soon broke away.

On the day of the march, thousands assembled to physically barricade the East End and prevent the BUF from entering their neighbourhood. Aided by the police, the fascists got as far as Cable Street, south of Whitechapel in East London, a narrow street with tall tenement buildings on each side. Here the police were unable to help Mosley's supporters advance as they were met by a sea of the local Jewish community, combined with others, who were present through their involvement in trade unions and other social movements and the local Irish and Chinese communities. The BUF were forced to make a hasty retreat, as women from the windows high above rained pots and pans
and other assorted projectiles on their heads, and children threw stones and anything else they could find.

Mosley and his band of fascists never recovered from the humiliating defeat they experienced at the hands of a united East End that day in 1936. After that, and given the deteriorating relationship with Nazi Germany, he soon came to the attention of the British government, and was in fact imprisoned during the war as a traitor. (Some years after the war, he dared to give a speech to much smaller crowd in Victoria Park, near Bethnal Green, and was spotted by passers by and chased away.) British fascism was dealt a near fatal blow by ordinary people in the 1930s, using a daring and varied combination of tactics and it took until the 1970s for them to recover the strength they had lost.

6: WOMEN AGAINST PIT CLOSURES

A mass organisation which successfully gave vital political and practical solidarity

In 1984, miners across the country entered into what became one of the longest and most significant industrial disputes in British history. After coming to power in 1979, Margaret Thatcher had understood that a conflict with miners, then the most militant and organised section of the British working class, was unavoidable, and had begun preparations. In the 1970s, the miners and in particular their union, the National Union of Mineworkers, had dealt severe blows to the British establishment, and Thatcher knew that the unions needed to be broken if her wider neoliberal project was to be successfully implemented.

Women Against Pit Closures was a solidarity organisation established during the 1984 - 85 miners strike in Britain, to engage women in the effort to win the dispute. It was particularly strong in mining communities themselves, and was led in the most part by women from mining families, though it was open to, and involved, women from all over the country and from all walks of life. It concerned itself with a number of strategic aims.

The most important was to provide real assistance to help the strikers continue their campaign. That meant fundraising to alleviate the chronic conditions that miners found themselves in during their prolonged experience of going without pay. Thousands of food bank programmes and other welfare and relief programmes were established and run by women, many of whom were engaging in political activity for the first time in their lives.

But Women Against Pit Closures also took on the challenge of raising political solidarity with the strike action and increasing the level of support for the cause among the general population, especially women. That meant the organisation of mass rallies, which even from their early days
attracted crowds of 5,000 women or more. A march in London in August 1984 attracted 23,000 women, most of them from working class communities. These were significant demonstrations of support for the strike, directed towards Thatcher and her supporters, including in the right wing media, who found it more difficult to dismiss women merely as union thugs.

Women Against Pit Closures on a demonstration

Women Against Pit Closures was particularly inspired by other examples of women in struggle, such as the leadership being shown by women at the time in the anti-nuclear and peace movements at Greenham Common and elsewhere.

The movement was grassroots, national and it was a visible mass movement with a presence in villages, towns and cities across the country. It inspired thousands of women with belief in their political leadership and played a vitally important role in sustaining the strike throughout its duration. Using diverse tactics it helped revolutionise the position of women in the labour movement, in many industrial and mining communities and in advancing the cause of feminism in an industry dominated by men. It brought about a real change in attitude in a trade union movement widely infected with sexism, and established women’s self-organised political activity as an essential component of the labour movement, a position it maintains today.

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