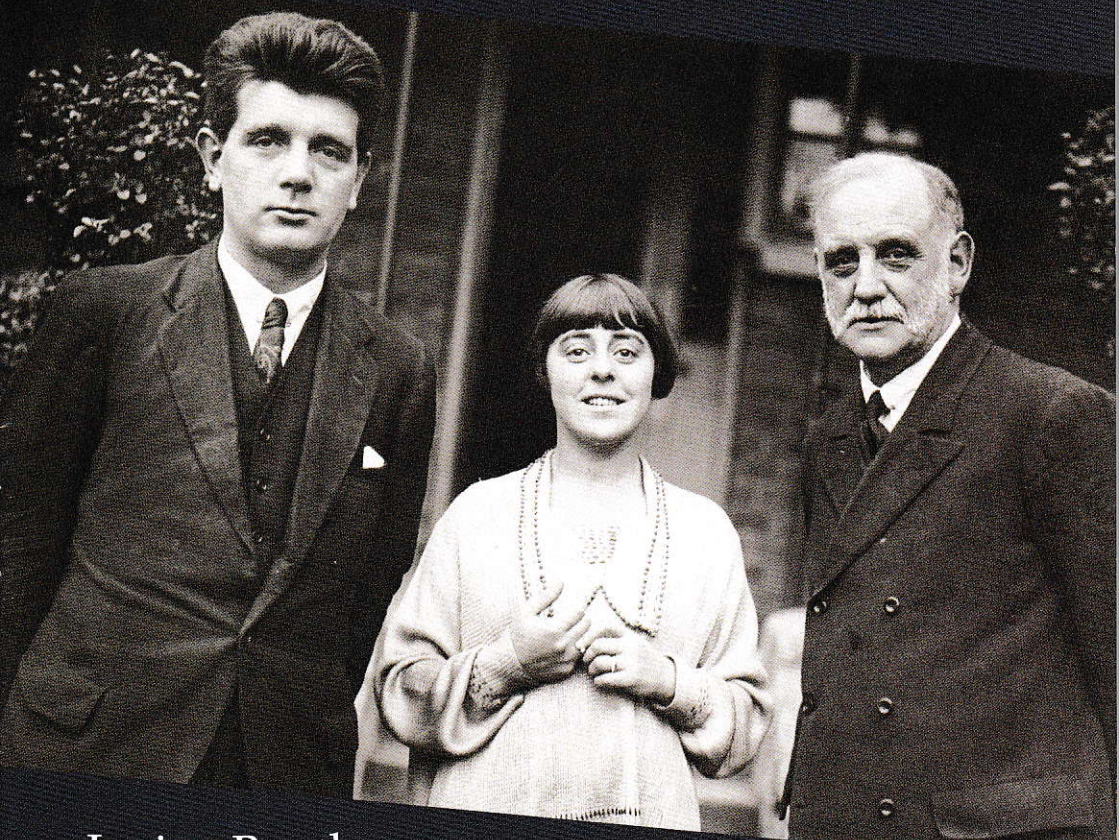


The Fourth George Lansbury

Memorial Lecture

GEORGE LANSBURY, MINNIE
LANSBURY AND MODERN FEMINISM

Wednesday 16 November 2016



Janine Booth

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The People's Palace, Queen Mary University

16 November 2016

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George Lansbury, Minnie Lansbury and Modern Feminism

I'm working on the assumption that most of you know a fair bit about George Lansbury but rather less about his daughter-in-law Minnie. So I'm going to tell you who Minnie Lansbury was, and as we walk through her life, and its intersection with George's, we will find relevance and lessons for modern-day feminism.

In fact, we've already come across relevance no.1 – the need to uncover from hidden history the stories of women who struggled for our rights. Minnie was a Lansbury but not by birth; a suffragette but not a Pankhurst; a political prisoner and martyr but somehow not remembered by history. Young, radical, working-class women do not have to choose from among the many men whom our movement remembers better in order to find role models: they can find one in Minnie Lansbury, amongst others.

Minnie (her name meaning 'rebel') was born in 1889, the second child of Jewish immigrants Isaac and Annie Glassman, who had fled anti-semitic persecution in Poland, then under the control of the Russian Czars.

Socialists and anarchists amongst the immigrant Jews promoted left-wing politics, trade unionism and integration with the British workers' movement. But the British labour movement was divided in its attitude to the Jewish immigrants – George Lansbury was supportive to them and enjoyed a good relationship with the East End's Jews; others, such as dockers' leader Ben Tillett, expressed sympathy but supported restrictions on immigration. Britain's first law to restrict immigration was aimed at the Jews – the Aliens Act 1905.

If you read accounts of attitudes to, and attacks on, Eastern European immigrant Jews then, you will notice a remarkable similarity to attitudes to Eastern European EU immigrants now – open racism from the right wing, and a pseudo-left-wing version that swallowed falsehoods that the immigrants were driving down wages and undercutting native Brits.

Then, as now, it is employers, not foreign workers, who drive down wages.

So, relevance no.2: Feminism is at its most effective when it makes alliances with other oppressed groups, refuses to be divided on the basis of race or nationality, when it involves and makes itself relevant to the big majority of women – working-class women – including those in immigrant communities, and refuses to allow itself to be divided by the national protectionism of either the right or the left. So: defend migrants and defend free movement; oppose anti-semitism and all forms of racism.

In 1911, Minnie Lansbury became a school teacher, at Fairclough Street primary school, later renamed Harry Gosling school.

It was a London County Council school, and most of the staff and pupils were Jewish.

When Minnie started, her salary was £90 per year, and then increased by £4 each year. Women teachers were paid £90-£130 and men £95-£140. There was an even bigger gulf between the classroom teacher and the head teacher, whose salary was more than double Minnie's.

Minnie joined the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and its local branch, the East London Teachers' Association (ELTA). Minnie soon became the union's subs collector, working to bring into the union teachers in this new school. In 1914, over 90% of trade union members were men, and Minnie was one of the single-figure percentage of women trade unionists.

Minnie and George were both strong and active supporters of trade union struggles. In the two years before the First World War, the Great Unrest saw a wave of strikes and a significant increase in trade union membership. This included women workers, in London including women garment workers and department store workers taking strike action. Poplar's socialists, including Labour councillors present and future, had been active supporters of the 1911 London Dock Strike.

Relevance no.3: Workers' action, through trade unions, are a key battlefield for women's rights. Today's feminists can be very effective in organising and supporting women workers' struggles, and in doing so, make feminism more relevant to working-class women.

Minnie took the fight for equal pay for women teachers to her union branch, and also raised the issue of votes for women.

In December 1913, Minnie supported a motion to the East London Teachers' Association to submit to the National Union of Teachers conference, proposing that the union 'should support the principle of equal pay for men and women teachers of the same professional status'. The motion was defeated by 26 votes to 25. Two years later, Minnie seconded a similar motion: this time it was defeated by 26 votes to 20.

Relevance no.4: Would that happen now? Probably not – on those issues at least. But while women workers gain a lot of strength and progress through our unions, we do still sometimes come up against backward attitudes and reluctance to support our demands. Trade unions are important and potentially powerful in the fight for women's rights, but sometimes it takes a fight to make them stand up for us.

Minnie Glassman married George's son Edgar Lansbury in 1914.

By marrying a non-Jewish man, Minnie was going against the expectations of the more conservative members of her community. This is probably the reason that she had a relatively low-key wedding, although she seems to have had the support of her family.

A newspaper reported:

Mr. Edgar Lansbury, son of Mr. George Lansbury, the former Socialist M.P. for Bow and Bromley and editor of the *Daily Herald*, was married on Thursday to Miss Minnie Glassman, who is a strong Socialist and suffragist. Like all members of the Lansbury family, the bridegroom is extremely popular in the district, but there were few people present at the ceremony in the early morning at the Poplar registrar's office. Mr. George Lansbury was there with his two daughters, Daisy and Jessie [who was actually his daughter-in-law] and so was the father of the bride. There were no bridesmaids; but the bridegroom's friend, Mr. Will Yoxley, acted as best man.

As a married woman, Minnie may have been expected to stop working – or at least, to stop working outside the home for wages. In fact, teachers were the only female London County Council staff not officially required to leave their job when they got married, but there was still

social pressure to do so, and many did. Not the new Mrs Minnie Lansbury, who continued to teach.

Minnie also remained politically active, in contrast to her new mother-in-law, Bessie Lansbury. Edgar would later describe how:

When the Pankhursts, with their tabulated statement of women's rights and grievances, came to Bow to open their national campaign for votes for women, they must have looked askance at our household and wondered what sort of suffragist father was to have kept his wife "in subjection" by having such a large family; and what sort of a woman suffragist mother was to allow her husband to get away with all the glory.

Relevance no.5: Although these days, employers can not require women to resign their jobs on marriage, and marital status is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act, marriage remains an issue for feminists: the right to decide who you marry – no forced marriage or proscriptions on who you can't marry; freedom not to marry; the allocation of domestic duties to women within marriage and the consequent restriction of women's public activities and potential.

As stated in the wedding report, Minnie was a suffragette. George Lansbury was the most well-known male supporter of women's suffrage in Britain, and several members of the Lansbury family were imprisoned for suffragette activities.

They were militant suffragettes. After decades of polite lobbying for women's right to vote had come to nothing, the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) launched more confrontational campaigning methods.

They marched, they smashed windows, they got arrested, they refused food and water in prison. This massively increased the profile of their campaign, intensified pressure for the vote and accelerated its victory.

Relevance no.6: Today as well, women can plead for rights or can take more assertive action. In Hackney this year, women from Sisters Uncut occupied empty housing and forced the council to house people. Campaigners in Doncaster saved their local women's refuge from closure. In Iceland (the country not the

shop!), women took strike action last month against the gender pay gap, walking out at 2.38pm, the time by which men had earned as much as they would earn all day.

But there was a difficult relationship between the suffragettes and the labour movement, which was brought into focus with the 1912 Bow and Bromley by-election.

George Lansbury resigned as Labour MP for the constituency, demanding that the Labour Party vote against every proposal by the Liberal government until it brought about votes for women. He stood in the ensuing by-election as the 'Women's Rights and Socialist' candidate, with the support of the WSPU and others. He was persuaded to take this course of action in conversation with national WSPU leaders Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, but locally, Sylvia Pankhurst and others disagreed with this tactic. Nevertheless, when George resigned and re-stood, they supported him.

While his supporters fought hard, there were problems from both sides. National WSPU organisers would not have their activists – including wealthy 'ladies' shipped in from wealthier parts of London – told what to do by the local labour movement election campaign, and labour organisers reciprocated their hostility. Lansbury lost, and was out of Parliament (though not out of politics!) for over a decade.

Relevance no.7: Although we have good reason to expect that the women's movement and the labour movement would be natural allies, there are real obstacles in practice: unfortunately, there is still some hostility to feminism in the workers' movement, and there is still a bourgeois feminism rooted in the aspirations of ruling-class women which opposes the workers' movement and its demands.

East London suffragettes, including Minnie Lansbury and Sylvia Pankhurst, built a working-class-based mass movement for universal suffrage, welcoming men's support and using, but not fetishising, militant tactics.

But the national WSPU, led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, demanded only that women have the vote on equal terms to men. Only better-off men had the vote; millions of working-class men did not. So the demand amounted to 'votes for ladies' only.

Christabel expelled Sylvia from the WSPU for sharing a platform with George Lansbury and Jim Larkin at a rally in support of locked-out Dublin workers at the Albert Hall in 1913. The East London WSPU branch continued as the East London Federation of the Suffragettes. The national WSPU went on to be actively pro-war and Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst became Conservative Party supporters.

German socialist women's leader Clara Zetkin explained that 'bourgeois feminism' represents women of the ruling class demanding equality with the men of their own class, not the liberation of all women.

Relevance no.8: Today's version of feminism that emphasises women in board-rooms (or in 10 Downing Street or in the White House!) while ignoring the demands of low-paid women workers is the modern equivalent of 'votes for ladies'. It is not just militancy that is important, it is politics and class. A mass, working-class-based women's movement, with the active support of the labour movement, including men, offers the best prospect for a feminism that is relevant and effective.

Minnie and George Lansbury opposed the First World War. In fact, the whole labour movement opposed the war – until it started! Then, many labour and trade union leaders switched to support the war, and the anti-war stance that Minnie and George continued to hold was very unpopular.

Minnie and Sylvia did not want ELFS to split on the issue of support or opposition to the War. They understood that working-class women whose husbands and sons had gone to War did not want to be told that they had done so for no better reason than to be cannon fodder for rival imperialisms.

Despite the government's promise that the War would be over by Christmas 1914, it carried on. And the longer it went on, the more discontented people became and the more they were prepared to listen to anti-war voices.

George Lansbury's *Herald* was the leading anti-war newspaper. Minnie and Edgar Lansbury took part in an anti-war protest at the Dock Gates on 17 December 1916, the *Woman's Dreadnought* reporting that:

Edgar and Minnie Lansbury were in the crowd, she with her black

sparkling eyes, and jaunty smile which always pleased me, hanging to his arm, her Puck-like glance seeming to convey to me, as she caught my eye, that she was here at his side to stir up, in kindly, affectionate spirit, her big, good-natured lazy-bones.

When the government started to run out of volunteers and introduced conscription in 1916, the Lansburys campaigned against it. Edgar objected to being conscripted on the grounds of his political responsibilities as a member of Poplar Borough Council, only for his political enemies to use their majority on the Tribunal to reject his application. He won his appeal and was exempted from military service.

Relevance no.9: It is important for feminism to oppose imperialism and war, and to champion internationalism. Today, there are women fighting the oppression that war brings, and fighting the rival, male-dominated leaderships that compete to be the ruling class that oppresses them. Women in Iraq, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Israel/Palestine, Syria and elsewhere need and deserve our solidarity.

Once the War started, the East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) threw itself into campaigning for – and providing for – the welfare of the people, primarily women, suffering on the home front. Minnie Lansbury became Assistant Secretary of ELFS, working full-time for the suffragette cause after resigning her job as a teacher. ELFS ran a day nursery, cost-price restaurants, a toy factory to employ women, milk distribution and more.

At the same time, ELFS demanded higher, and more prompt payments of, separation allowances, higher wages for women workers and control of prices.

Putting food on the table in working-class households sometimes required direct confrontation with businesses and the state. In this unpublished passage, Sylvia Pankhurst reports on Minnie Lansbury's response to one such confrontation:

Minnie Lansbury burst in, exultantly announcing "a riot in the Roman!" A crowd of women had threatened to storm a fish and chip shop for potatoes. A policeman attempting to stop them had been swept aside and "they tore off all his buttons!", her black

eyes twinkled with merriment. To save further disturbance the policeman had compelled the fishmonger to bring out his store of potatoes and sell them at three halfpence a pound from a table outside his door.

Relevance no.10: In the modern era of food banks and collections for refugees, practical assistance works best alongside fighting for political demands rather than as an alternative to it.

The mainstream suffrage organisations, including the WSPU, suspended campaigning for votes for women in order to support the war. Similarly, the trade union leadership signed up to the Treasury Agreement and suspended industrial action during the war.

But in the Lansburys' east end, both these struggles continued. ELFS – renamed the Workers' Suffrage Federation in March 1916 – continued to campaign for votes for women (and for working-class men), and several strikes took place, with the support of local socialists. In 1918, for example, workers on the buses, trams and London Underground took strike action for equal pay for women workers, despite their union's General Secretary telling them not to.

The capitalist class and its politicians will always use 'national emergencies' to suggest that we all pull together and forget class differences and inequalities. But those differences and inequalities continue. Even future Tory Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin observed in 1918 that the Parliament elected that year was populated by "hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war". Today, the Conservative government urges that "we are all in it together" and so must accept austerity, while the gap between rich and poor is wider than ever.

Relevance no.11: 'National emergencies' such as war or economic crisis do not require us to stop fighting for our rights. Employers and sexists do not stop oppressing us during these times, so the fight for women's and workers' rights goes on.

The labour movement – while divided on supporting or opposing the War – united in demanding labour and women's representation on the committees such as those that administered war relief.

Minnie became a labour-appointed member of the local War Pensions Committee, first – briefly – in Hackney, then in Poplar, where she later became Committee chair.

Poplar Labour councillor Charlie Sumner said that

There was no better friend who fought an unscrupulous Government, on behalf of ex-service men and widows, than Minnie Lansbury.

Sylvia Pankhurst described how Minnie

brought the determination – rare among the holders of such office – to fight to get the greatest possible advantages for the workers concerned. She made no pretence of impartiality between the Government and the applicant, and fought, as a lawyer does, to get the best possible terms for her client.

And her husband Edgar paid his own tribute to Minnie:

Although she strove hard to alleviate suffering, she always looked forward to the day when preventable misery and economic injustice would be no more.

Relevance no.12: Minnie Lansbury did not act as an unbiased administrator of the capitalist system but as a partisan champion of its victims. Direct labour representation in politics remains crucial – not to administer capitalism but to champion the interests of working-class women and men.

In 1917, the Russian Czar was brought down by a workers' revolution, and both George and Minnie Lansbury were enthusiastic in their support for the new workers' state. The revolution was sparked by mass demonstrations on International Women's Day.

A major labour movement conference in Leeds showed widespread support for the revolution, and made (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to set up workers' councils in Britain modelled on the soviets.

In 1920, the Lansburys were caught up in scandal-mongering by *The Times* when Minnie's family helped to process a donation to the *Daily*

Herald brought into the country in the form of Russian jewels. George Lansbury eventually refused the donation.

Minnie and Edgar joined the Communist Party when it was formed in 1920. George, however, never did, stating that he believed that revolution was the right road for Russia but the wrong one for Britain. George visited Russia in 1920, met Lenin and wrote a pamphlet about his visit.

Right-wingers in Britain attacked the Lansburys and other socialists for their Bolshevik associations, and constantly repeated the allegation that communists wanted 'nationalisation of women'. On the contrary, women had played a major role in the revolution and the new workers' government introduced immediate measures to widen women's freedom and improve women's social position.

Relevance no.13: For Minnie Lansbury and others, liberating women meant liberating the whole of humanity, which meant overthrowing capitalism and abolishing the division of society into classes. Today, we still have capitalism and we still have women's oppression, and we still need to overthrow them.

In 1918, Minnie Lansbury and Sylvia Pankhurst parted ways politically.

The Representation of the People Act was on its way and in the forthcoming General Election, all men aged 21 or over and all women aged 30 or over would have the vote. Sylvia argued that socialists should follow Russian workers along the revolutionary path and not give Parliament credibility by taking part in elections to it. Minnie also fought for revolution, but believed that despite the limitations of Parliamentary democracy, working-class political representation within existing structures could be part of that fight.

The Workers' Suffrage Federation – now renamed the Workers' Socialist Federation – took Sylvia's view; Minnie stopped being its Assistant Secretary, and became active instead in the Labour Party and the Communist Party. It seems ironic that after decades of huge efforts and sacrifice had finally won the fight for votes for women, Sylvia advocated not using those votes.

Relevance no.14: The Russian workers had been able to disregard the Constituent Assembly because the Soviets had become a parallel, alternative

democratic structure. But that was not the situation in Britain. The workers' movement and the women's movement could progress their cause by taking part in Parliamentary elections, and using it in the fight for working-class political representation. We still can today.

Labour lost the hastily called 1918 General Election, and Tory/Liberal coalition government was formed. But in 1919, Labour did well in the London County Council elections, and very well in the elections to Boards of Guardians and Borough Councils across London.

George and Edgar Lansbury were among the Labour councillors and guardians elected in Poplar, and Minnie Lansbury was appointed as an Alderman – a member of the Council with a status between the Mayor and the elected Councillors. Poplar Labour was at the forefront of increasing the political representation of women as well as workers. Four Labour women were elected to the Council – Jennie MacKay, Jane March, Nellie Cressall and Julia Scurr – and two of the four Labour aldermen appointed were also women: Minnie and Susan Lawrence.

Although it was not yet gender-balanced, Poplar Council looked much more like the people it served than it had previously. Rather than being dominated by businessmen, it now included railway workers, dockers, school teachers and other working people.

Relevance no.15: We still fall short of equality between women and men among Labour's elected representatives, although things have slowly improved – for example, there are now more women in the Shadow Cabinet than ever before. However, things have gone backwards in terms of the proportion of working-class people among Labour MPs. By 2010, only 9% of Labour MPs had come from manual or clerical jobs. It is important for socialist-feminism to insist that increasing women's representation goes together with, rather than being at the expense of, increasing working-class representation.

The newly elected Poplar Labour Council and Guardians immediately set about improving conditions for the local working-class population that had elected them.

Amongst other things, it introduced both a minimum wage of £4 per week, and equal pay for men and women, which together raised women council workers' wages by an average 70%.

Minnie Lansbury was particularly involved in the Public Health and Housing, and Maternity and Child Welfare Committees, which: expanded maternity and child welfare services; appointed housing inspectors; built new housing; and provided a TB dispensary.

George Lansbury summed up why Poplar's new Council took such radical action:

Labour Councillors must be different from those we have displaced, or why displace them?

Relevance no. 16: Perhaps we could print George's quote on a postcard and send it to every Labour councillor in the country now. Instead of closing libraries (as Lambeth Council is doing) or cutting the pay of teaching assistants (as Durham County Council is doing), they could prioritise making material improvements to local people's lives.

After a brief post-war boom, there was a collapse in export trade and an economic crisis which brought mass unemployment in Poplar. Local councils had to raise all their funds through local taxation, with no redistribution between rich and poor boroughs. Poplar Council could not provide the services that its people needed within that financial system without increasing rates on the very people it was serving and who could ill afford it.

Poplar's labour movement debated and decided its council's strategy for tackling this dire situation. Labour Party women played a key role in this.

One reason they were able to do this is that socialists and feminists had built a strong local base over years – decades – of political activity. The councillors and many of their supporters had been suffragettes, community campaigners, trade unionists. They had organised demonstrations, strikes, welfare provision. They had spoken on street corners, given out leaflets, knocked on doors, held small education classes. This work paid off when the time came for a major confrontation.

Relevance no.17: Struggles, including those for women's rights, are at their most effective when they are organised on a participatory, democratic basis. The work that activists do in quieter times helps to prepare for strong campaigning when a crisis comes.

The council had a choice. It could cut services, raise the rates, or refuse to do either and defy the law.

Like the suffragettes before them, Poplar's Labour councillors chose to break the law in order to fight for justice. They voted to refuse to collect and pass on the element of the rates – called the 'precepts' – that were supposed to go to cross-London bodies such as the London County Council and the Water Board.

The court issued a 'mandamus' instructing them to collect and pay the precepts, but still they refused. They were found in contempt of court and over the first five days of September 1921, thirty councillors were imprisoned – 5 women in Holloway prison, 25 men in Brixton.

As they were arrested, Minnie said:

I wish the Government joy in its effort to get this money from the people of Poplar. Poplar will pay its share of London's rates when Westminster, Kensington, and the City do the same!

Relevance no.18: The history of feminism and other liberation struggles is landmarked by movements breaking bad laws. This is not something to do as a matter of principle, but when the law forces you to either attack your own people or to defy that law, then defiance can be both a moral imperative and a winning strategy. Local government finance law is different today – not least because of Poplar's victory. But that doesn't mean that defiance is no longer possible, only that it might take a technically different form.

Minnie wrote a letter to *The Times* protesting against the poor conditions in the prison in which her husband, father-in-law and other male councillors were held, accusing the government of 'political spite'. And she challenged the conditions in Holloway too, especially the neglect of pregnant Nellie Cressall in the hospital wing.

The councillors continued to refuse to levy the precepts, helped to organise the campaign from behind bars, and after a couple of weeks, forced the authorities to allow them to meet as a council in Brixton prison, with the women councillors driven from Holloway to take part. Supporters demonstrated in the evenings outside the two prisons. Eventually, two other councils voted to take the same action as Poplar had.

On 21 September, Nellie Cressall was released early due to her pregnancy and then on 12 October, six weeks after their arrest, the rest of the councillors were also released, without backing down, without having 'purged their contempt'. The government backed down and rushed through the Local Authorities (Financial Provisions) Act 1921, which provided for pooling of local government funding, benefiting Poplar Council by £250,000 per year and benefiting other poor boroughs too.

The material benefit to the women (and them men) of Poplar was immense, and the political victory was huge.

Relevance no.19: Fighting for working-class women's interests? If you mobilise, if you stick to your guns, you can win.

Over Christmas 1921, Minnie Lansbury developed flu, which turned into pneumonia. Under normal circumstances, a healthy 32-year-old woman's body would have fought this off. But these were not normal circumstances, and Minnie's body was weakened by her six-week spell in prison. On 1 January 1922, Minnie Lansbury died.

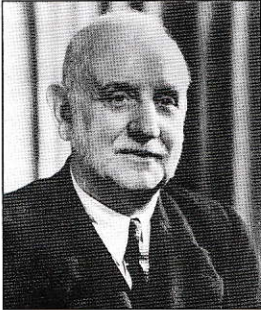
Thousands upon thousands of people turned out for her funeral. A Christian minister conducted the services, and her ashes were interred with Jewish rites.

Among many tributes, George Lansbury said: 'Minnie, in her 32 years, crammed double that number of years' work compared with what many of us are able to accomplish. Her glory lies in the fact that with all her gifts and talents one thought dominated her whole being night and day: How shall we help the poor, the weak, the fallen, weary and heavy-laden, to help themselves?'

Last but not least, Relevance no.20: Feminism can have its role models. Minnie Lansbury, loved by the working-class women and men of east London, whatever their gender, ethnicity, religion or lack of it; a daughter of Jewish immigrants, a socialist, feminist, suffragette, school teacher, trade unionist, anti-war campaigner, revolutionary opponent of capitalism and advocate for its victims, Labour Alderman and rebel councillor deserves her place among those role models. May her life and her memory inspire, educate and strengthen us.

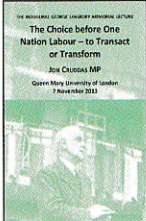


Janine Booth is a trade unionist, poet and disability rights activist who in 2009 published the latest book on the Poplar councillors' revolt, in which Lansbury played a leading part: *Guilty and Proud of It! Poplar's Rebel Councillors and Guardians 1919-1925* (Merlin Press).



The George Lansbury Memorial Trust was founded in 2012 to commemorate the life, work and legacy of George Lansbury MP (1859–1940). A pioneering campaigner for peace, women's rights, local democracy and improvements in labour conditions, Lansbury was an adopted East Ender who made a great contribution to local as well as national life. For over 40 years he was a member of Bow Church, and his funeral was held there.

George Lansbury was one of the most distinguished Christian Socialists in British history, whose campaigning politics sought to apply his faith in public life.



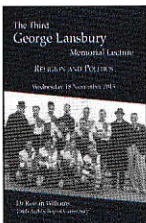
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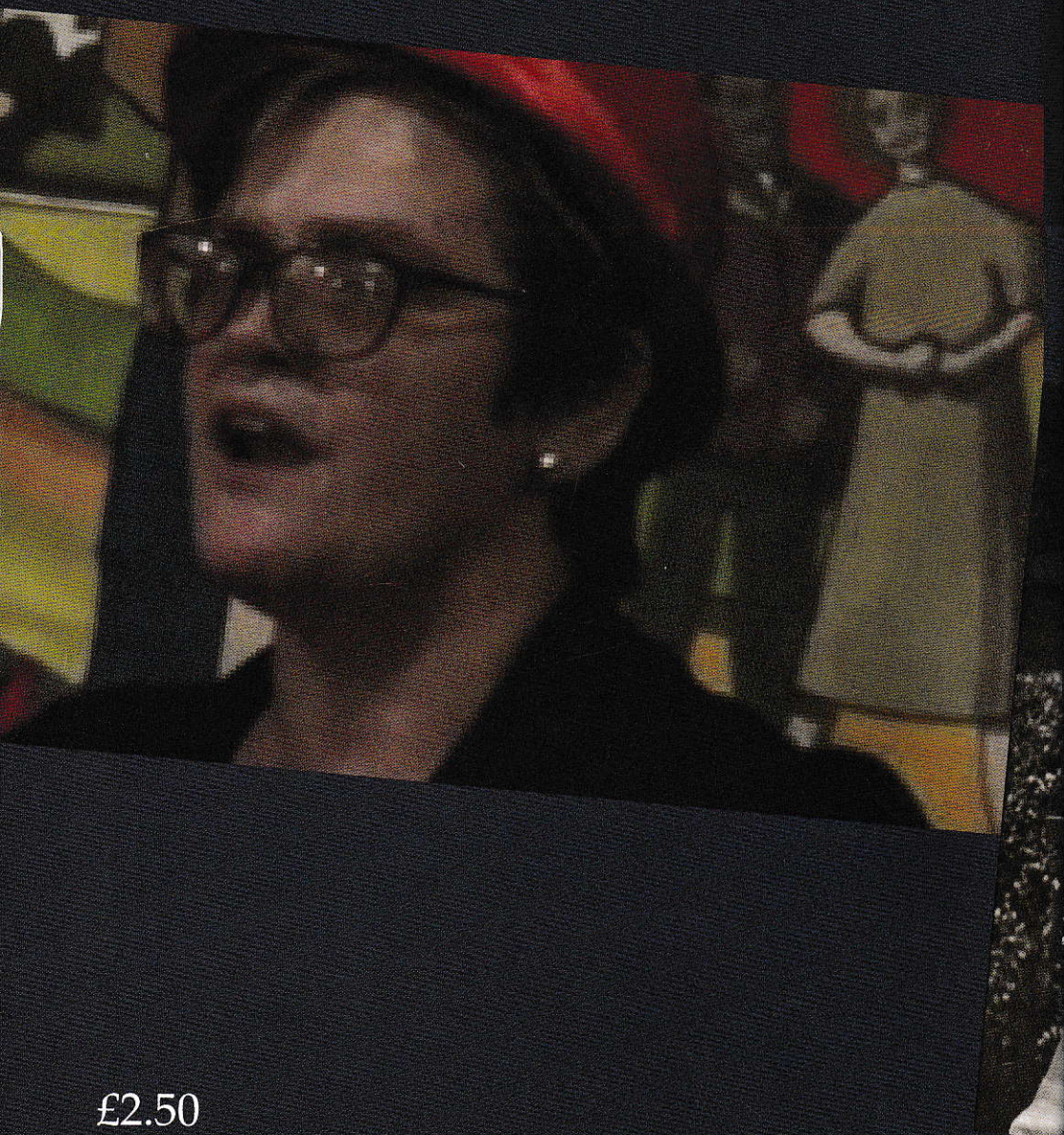
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