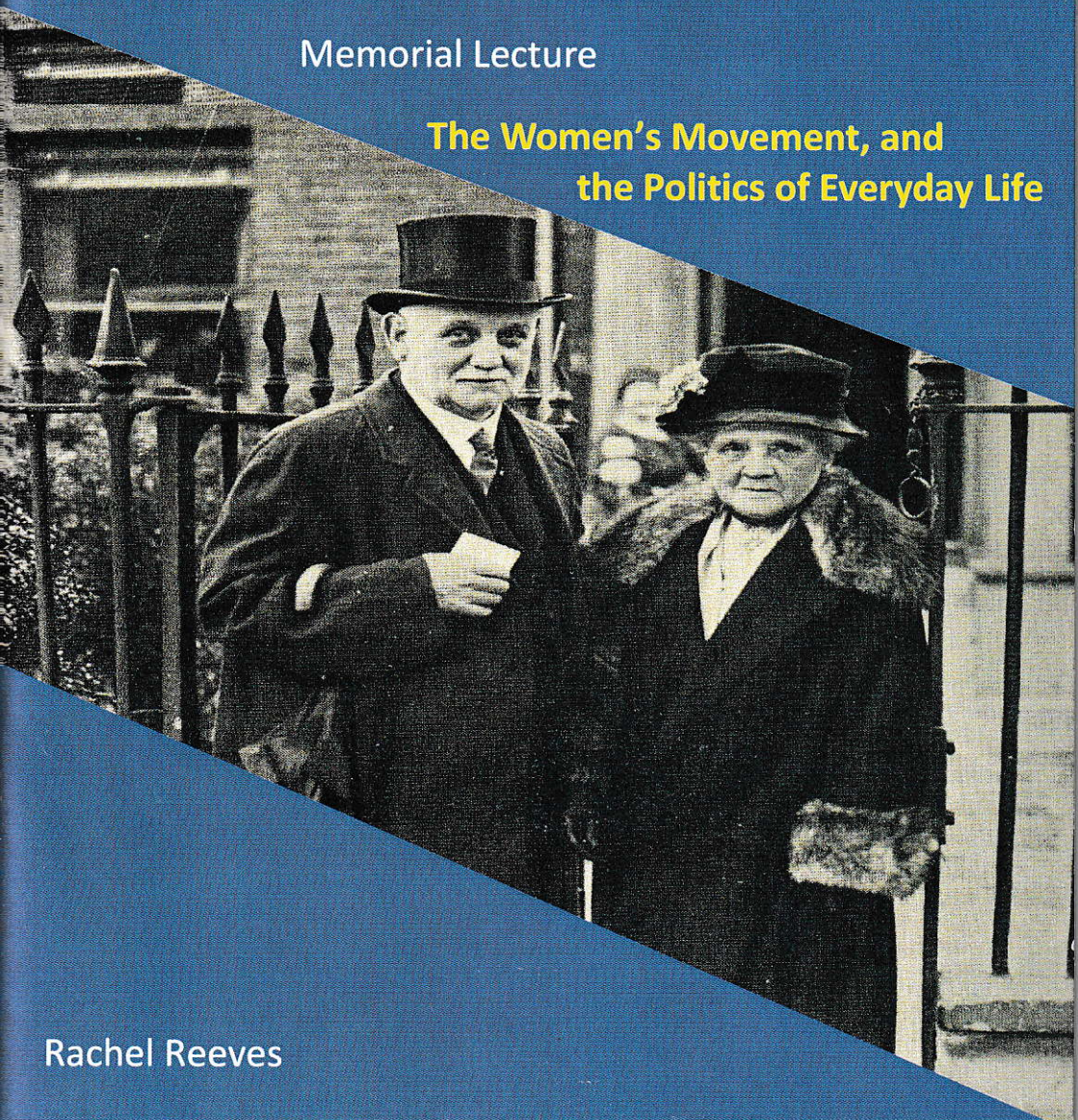
The Sixth

George Lansbury

Memorial Lecture

The Women's Movement, and the Politics of Everyday Life



Rachel Reeves

In grateful memory of Joy Wotton
and her immense contribution to the
George Lansbury Memorial Trust

The Sixth George Lansbury Memorial Lecture

Rachel Reeves
The Women's Movement and, the Politics of Everyday Life

The People's Palace, Queen Mary University
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Rachel Reeves, 'George Lansbury, the Women's Movement, and the Politics of Everyday Life'
Lansbury Memorial Lecture, 22nd November 2018

Introduction

Thank you Tim Bale, and to Pippa Catterall and the George Lansbury Memorial Trust for inviting me to deliver this lecture today, and to Queen Mary University of London for hosting.

The other person I should acknowledge is John Shepherd.

John's biography of Lansbury reads as a real labour of love, and taught me a lot about Lansbury's work and the suffrage movement.

Lansbury's ethical socialism

It is a particular privilege to be delivering this lecture at Queen Mary.

We are just a stone's throw from where George Lansbury lived for much of his life, and the area that he represented as a Member of Parliament.

If you were to leave this campus and walk just ten minutes or so westwards, towards the City, you would find yourself in Whitechapel.

In May 1880, Lansbury and his wife Bessie were married at the parish church there.

An even shorter distance eastwards, and you would find yourself at the site of his home in Bow.

Slightly further and you find yourself at the clock commemorating his daughter-in-law, Minnie Lansbury, the suffragette.

George Lansbury stands in that proud ethical tradition of English socialism, alongside William Morris, Edward Carpenter, and RH Tawney.

This is a tradition many of us identify with strongly.

Central to it is the belief that the damage done by untrammelled markets and by avarice is not only material, but also moral.

It represents an ethical degradation of human life.

Too often we talk as if this is an exclusively male tradition.

Sometimes, even in 2018, it feels as if we are sold a story of the personalities and ideas which shaped a movement as vast, as powerful and as transformative as the British Labour movement which is entirely bereft of women.

A procession of Hardie, Lansbury, Cole, Attlee, Crosland, Wilson, Callaghan, Blair, Brown and Corbyn.

So while I want to start by talking about George Lansbury, I want to be broader than that.

I want to bring to the fore the women who shaped his politics, and the wider movement against oppression by gender, as well as class.

That included some of the first women MPs – Ellen Wilkinson, Margaret Bondfield, and Susan Lawrence – whose work I will discuss later in this lecture.

But also his wife Bessie, his daughter-in-law Minnie, and others around him.

George Lansbury represented many things.

He was at once an ethical socialist; a practicing member of the Church of England; a politician rooted in the social and religious life of his East End community; and – perhaps unusually – a ceaseless campaigner for women's rights.

In many ways, he embodied the things that are shared in common by feminism and ethical socialism.

Both rejected the idea that the proper concerns of labour politics started and finished on the shop floor.

They sought instead to expand politics beyond the boundaries of the unionised workplace and parliament, into the community, the chapel and the home.

Questions of the household, healthcare, and community life were to sit alongside those of production.

We might think of them as forming a politics of everyday life, or indeed, predating the cry of the 1970s Women's Liberation Movement: that the personal is political.

Lansbury's career encompassed the rise of the labour movement, the party's formation, and the difficult interwar period – the time in which Labour finally came to power, but suffered profound setbacks brought on by political divisions and economic crisis, the rise of fascism on the continent, and the march to war.

Having inherited the Labour leadership largely by default after the electoral catastrophe of 1931, Lansbury's pacifism saw him forced out as leader after the 1935 party conference, to be replaced by Major Clement Attlee.

Lansbury would not live to see the war's end and all that followed for Labour.

In this sense, his legacy is less clear than that of Attlee, Bevan or Morrison.

However, as Jon Cruddas argued in the inaugural Lansbury memorial lecture, it remains vital to reconnect with the ethical character of Lansbury's socialism, if Labour is to build a politics able to govern, and transform, a divided country.

Partly, Lansbury's story is about Labour's roots in the church, in municipal socialism, and the ILP tradition.

His life and activism also intersected with a powerful women's movement, and a whole network of extraordinary women emerging from the working-class and women's movements.

And his politics were shaped by women around him every bit as much as by leading Labour men like Morris and Hardie.

Lansbury and the women's movement

Lansbury came of political age in the tumult of the East End in the latter years of the nineteenth century.

As early as 1887, working women had been campaigning for the vote in Stratford.

And just a matter of minutes from the house in which Lansbury would live for much of his adult life, and just a short walk down the road from here, on Fairfield Road, was the Bryant and May Match Factory.

In the late nineteenth century, most trade unions excluded women.

And even for those that did try, the kind of work women did, in small workshops or in homes, rather than in large factories, meant that women workers were extremely difficult to recruit and retain as trade union members.

In 1888, incensed by poor pay and working conditions, and by the health effects of working with white phosphorous, well over a thousand women and girls employed at the match factory went on strike.

It was the first strike organised among unskilled women workers, and it represented a key moment in the rise of the 'new unionism'.

It served as a precursor to the dock strike of 1889, a cause which Lansbury actively supported.

It was of course the dock strike that showed the extraordinary capacity of the British labour movement to mobilise unskilled, casual labourers, and to bring together the estranged interests of Catholics and Protestants, the churches and socialists, and the working class and parts of the middle class, all in a democratic politics of the common good.

It was this coalition that would form the basis of the Independent Labour Party.

It was built on as Labour achieved its electoral breakthrough in the first half of the twentieth century.

As a young man, Lansbury would frequently attend rallies in Victoria Park.

Annie Besant, one of the leading figures associated with the Bryant and May strike, was often among the speakers.

Lansbury could not fail to understand the vital role of women in the labour movement from the start.

But he first came into close contact with the women's movement in a rare foray outside of the politics of the East End.

In the 1906 election, he stood as an independent socialist candidate in Middlesbrough.

The Labour Party in Middlesbrough had a strong feminist presence and it was there that he built a close working relationship, and a lifelong friendship, with Marion Coates Hansen, a dominant figure in the local politics of Teeside.

Years later, in a letter to Coates Hansen, Lansbury attested to the profound impact that she, and his wife Bessie, had had on his politics. He wrote:

> *'Now you must take some responsibility for having educated me on the women's question. You know that when I came to Middlesbrough, I was an adult suffragist, and put it just as part of my propaganda. I have learned during the seven years that have passed to understand it in another sense altogether... It is because of Bessie and millions like her that I have come to understand all that is meant by citizenship, comradeship and a real place in life.'*

And Coates Hansen stayed in contact with Lansbury for years afterwards, never hesitating to offer her opinion on his actions.

In 1919, she, and her sister-in-law Alice Coates, would become the first two women members of Middlesbrough Borough Council.

More women would influence Lansbury throughout his life.

They included the Welsh grandmother who introduced him to *Reynolds Newspaper*, the radical weekly; his mother who took him to the election hustings at Blackheath aged nine, and his wife, Bessie.

Bessie Lansbury shared Lansbury's Christian faith and his politics.

However, as Shepherd tells us, often this involved her staying at home, looking after a growing family, while her husband busied himself with a life in politics.

Often he would return from a speaking engagement elsewhere in the country in the early hours.

Bessie would always be 'waiting up with a first-class breakfast a nice big fire.'

The Lansburys' home life operated according to a deeply traditional gendered division of labour.

And his son-in-law, Raymond Postgate, noted his 'typically Victorian unwillingness to discuss sex' and the fact that 'the mechanics of contraception disgusted him.'

However, he firmly believed in the public equality of women, and in the cause of women's suffrage: the reason women should have the vote, he would say, was 'because they were human beings, the same as men.'

This placed him squarely on the side of Keir Hardie, who alienated many of his Labour colleagues through his commitment to women's suffrage.

After his election as MP for Bow and Bromley in December 1910 he continued to campaign on the issue.

In June 1912, he had to be persuaded to leave the Commons chamber after lambasting the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, in quite extraordinary terms.

Distressed by the force-feeding of hunger-striking suffragettes in prison, Lansbury rushed from his seat to stand face to face with Asquith. He told the Prime Minister:

'You are beneath contempt. You call yourselves gentlemen and you forcibly feed and murder women in this fashion! You ought to be driven out of office. You will go down in history as the man who tortured innocent women.'

That November, after a clandestine meeting with Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in Boulogne, Lansbury resigned from Parliament.

He called a by-election on the issue of votes for women.

The 1912 by-election campaign served as an extraordinary set-piece for the suffrage movement, and a testament to Lansbury's capacity to inspire.

Lansbury was denied the support of the national party and the ILP, and was forced to stand as an independent.

However, he was supported by individual supporters, his local party, much of the suffrage movement, and his wife, Bessie.

Bessie's own political interventions were extremely rare.

But she spoke in support of her husband and the cause of women's suffrage during the 1912 by-election campaign in Bow and Bromley, declaring that:

'I have felt for many years the very great need for women on all our public bodies and therefore feel glad indeed to support him in our great movement for VOTES FOR WOMEN.'

John Shepherd writes that, 'in effect, there were several campaigns in progress, waged by feminist organisations' in

support of Lansbury – the Women's Social and Political Union and the Women's Freedom League chief among them.

And a large rally was organised for the Saturday before polling, on Roman Road.

The Times reported that 'every train, tram car and motor omnibus on Saturday afternoon brought fresh reserves of feminine canvassers and bill-distributors. There seemed to be thousands of suffragist volunteers in the division, and the pavements were white with their discarded gifts.'

But for Bessie, her socialism came before her right to the vote.

Their son Edgar Lansbury noted of Bessie's reaction to the arrival of affluent WSPU activists in the by-election campaign that:

'In a way she resented their coming into Bow and sidetracking the enthusiasm of the growing movement for socialism into an agitation for "votes for women" which in her view was always a subsidiary issue.'

Whilst affluent suffragettes poured into the East End, ready to mobilise already radical working women, Bessie keenly identified a tension we may still feel today: that the politics of class and the politics of gender are deeply entwined, and yet so often blind to the other.

And while Lansbury was conscious of the ideological sacrifice his wife had made, it is certainly not a relationship that looks now like an equal or progressive one.

We cannot forget that Lansbury was, in many ways, a religious conservative and a product of his time.

In the end, Lansbury was defeated by the Conservative and Unionist candidate.

Having struggled to justify his decision to resign from a seat he had won just two years earlier, and lacking the support of his own party, Lansbury fell 800 votes short of Reginald Blair.

Out of Parliament, in April 1913, Lansbury's prominence in the suffrage campaign led to his arrest.

Following a Women's Social and Political Union rally at the Albert Hall, Lansbury was charged with disturbing the peace.

Having opted to go on hunger strike, Lansbury's poor health meant that he was soon released, securing his status as a hero of the suffrage movement.

In 1914, George's son Edgar married Minnie Glassman.

Minnie was another leading East End suffragist and trade unionist.

And unlike Bessie Lansbury, Minnie took on a prominent political role herself, and kept working as a teacher after marriage.

At the Lansbury Memorial Lecture in 2016, Janine Booth powerfully made the case for Minnie's enduring relevance, as a trade unionist, and a campaigner for women's welfare and suffrage, and against the slide to the First World War.

Lansbury's leadership

After 1912, George Lansbury was out of Parliament for a period of ten years.

This period incorporated his editorship of the leading Labour newspaper *The Daily Herald*, and membership of Poplar Borough Council, which would climax in 1921 with the Poplar Rates Rebellion and another spell of imprisonment.

Finally, in 1922, Lansbury was re-elected as MP for Bow and Bromley.

He would not serve in the first Labour Government, in 1924, but would enter in 1929.

However, throughout, he remained a left-wing critic of the leadership.

The decision of Labour's first Prime Minister, Ramsey McDonald, to enter into a national government to see through an austerity programme, had been an enormous setback for Labour's electoral advances.

In the 1931 election, with many of its previous leading figures standing on a national ticket, the Party's vote collapsed.

Just 52 MPs remained.

McDonald's successor as leader of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson, was among those unseated.

And crucially, no Labour women survived the storm.

With the Parliamentary Labour Party so depleted, Lansbury assumed the leadership, almost by default.

This period, between 1931 and 1935, was one of retrenchment for the Labour movement and for the progress of women in Parliament.

In the 1935 General Election, Labour would experience a substantial revival.

However, a month earlier, Lansbury had been ousted from the leadership and replaced by Clement Attlee.

His pacifism proved impossible to reconcile with the politics of the mid-1930s.

Although Ellen Wilkinson returned to Parliament in 1935, the next great advance for Labour women would have to wait until 1945.

However, the arrival of suffrage for some women in 1918 and all adult women in 1928 ensured that Lansbury worked alongside some pioneering women socialists during his parliamentary career.

It is to these great contemporaries of Lansbury's that I will now turn, starting with Ellen Wilkinson.

Ellen Wilkinson

It was in Middlesbrough – site of Lansbury's wholehearted conversion to the cause of women's suffrage –that another trailblazer of Labour history was first elected to Parliament, in 1924.

Ellen Wilkinson, 'Red Ellen', served as the Member there until 1931, when she lost her seat along with so many other Labour MPs.

Wilkinson was the product of an extremely poor community in Manchester.

Like Marion Coates Hansen, her feminism and socialism were intertwined: her analysis of gender inequality was rooted in class conflict, and the way capitalism pitted the interests of the rich minority against those of the working class.

Like Lansbury, she was on the left of the party, a critic of McDonald's leadership, and a pacifist.

In 1929, she wrote for the *Daily Herald* on 'Why Women Should Vote Labour'.

Wilkinson emphasised the power of politics to transform women's everyday lives.

For workers, she spoke of Labour's commitment to "putting the strong arm of the law between her and the sweating employer"; for housewives, she spoke of investing in health and education, and ending tuberculosis and rickets – still prevalent in poor communities – advocating the provision of free school milk.

Alongside a whole range of issues, Wilkinson championed the cause of working-class women.

Her tireless work on widows' pensions attracted so much correspondence that she joked: 'I feel sometimes that I am the

Member for widows rather than the Member for Middlesbrough.'

When Lansbury left the *Daily Herald* in 1925, he founded a new paper, *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, and turned to Wilkinson to provide the paper's weekly parliamentary column.

And, when the paper arranged a huge rally at the Albert Hall to show solidarity with striking miners after the TUC had called off the General Strike, Wilkinson and Lansbury shared the platform.

They also shared a disillusionment with the McDonald government before the 1931 split.

Wilkinson is of course best known for her role in the Jarrow Crusade.

The closure of the steelworks in 1931 in Wilkinson's new constituency and the demolition of its shipyard in 1934 'cut the throat of Jarrow'.

Unemployment increased to an astounding 70 per cent.

Back in Parliament as Member for Jarrow in 1935, Wilkinson was clear that this was a wider problem. She said: 'Jarrow's plight is not a local problem...it is the symptom of a national evil'.

Her response was to organise the famous 1936 hunger march.

It remains one of the most potent symbols of the 'hungry thirties' and of the history of the labour movement.

While Wilkinson and Lansbury agreed on so much, it was her anti-fascism that caused their politics to diverge, and Wilkinson to abandon her pacifist sympathies.

Having visited Spain, and seen the unfolding disaster of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's rise, Wilkinson came to the fore of the campaign to support the republican cause, and was elected Secretary of the Spain Subcommittee on Labour's National Executive.

And having witnessed the effects of malnutrition on children in Madrid, Wilkinson would set up a 'Milk for Spain' fund.

Her small stature at just 4 foot 11, and her devotion to this cause earned her the nickname of 'the pocket pasionara'.

Wilkinson would go on to serve as Education Secretary in the 1945 Labour Government, pushing through the raising of the school leaving age despite much opposition and hesitation even from some of her cabinet colleagues, and introducing free school milk.

But her radicalism also extended to disrupting the workings of Parliament itself.

She challenged its male-dominated culture.

Wilkinson embraced a vivacious and daring fashion sense, with bright colours.

And she was the first woman MP to attempt to enter the male-only Smoking Room.

As she bounded up to the door, a policeman stopped her and informed her that ladies did not usually enter.

'I am not a lady – I am a Member of Parliament', she told them as she opened the door.

Wilkinson's death in 1947, aged 55, brought an end to a career in which she had already achieve so much.

Margaret Bondfield

Let's move just across the Tyne from Jarrow, in Wallsend, to the east of Newcastle.
It was there that Margaret Bondfield was returned in 1929, having previously represented the seat of Northampton after 1923.

Upon the formation of the second Labour Government in 1929, Bondfield was made Britain's first woman cabinet minister.

Bondfield was from a working-class community in Somerset.

She had worked as a shop-assistant and trade union organiser before becoming an MP.

Bondfield had first read about the Shop Assistant's Union in a newspaper wrapped around her supper of chips: a dinner which changed her life forever.

She joined the union and eventually became its Assistant Secretary, as well as the first woman to Chair the General Council of the Trades Union Congress.

Alongside Lansbury, she had been a member of the Social Democratic Federation, Britain's short-lived and unsuccessful Marxist party of the late nineteenth century.

And they had both been prominent in the movement to oppose the march to war in 1914, sharing a platform at a huge rally in Trafalgar Square in August 1914.

Bondfield was at the fore of that first generation of Labour women.

But she rejected the idea that this distinguished her from her peers, reflecting that 'some woman was bound to be the first. That I should be was the accident of dates and events.'

Among the causes Bondfield championed was the provision of footwear for children, and in December 1928, she put forward a 'Boots for Bairns' bill to this effect.

All but one of Parliament's seven women members were among the bill's supporters.

However, like Lansbury, Bondfield's political career was unable to withstand the political tumult of the 1930s.

If her rise to the top was 'the accident of dates and events', so too was her abrupt fall.

Her appointment as Minister for Labour meant that she was tasked with implementing cuts to unemployment relief.

These formed part of a package of measures deemed necessary to meet the terms of the American loan in the wake of the Wall Street Crash and the onset of depression.

Amongst the policies Bondfield implemented was a Family Means Test and the Anomalies Act of 1931.

The Anomalies Act disqualified 180,000 married women from benefits on the grounds that they were not seriously looking for work.

This attracted the ire of Ellen Wilkinson as well as Jennie Lee and Eleanor Rathbone, the Independent MP and champion of Family Allowances.

Despite her loyalty to McDonald, Bondfield opted not to join the MPs who followed him into the National Government.

She lost her seat in the disastrous 1931 election, to the Conservative MP Irene Ward, and never returned to Parliament.

Susan Lawrence

Susan Lawrence was a closer constituency neighbour of Lansbury's, elected for East Ham in 1923.

Lawrence's own background differed sharply from those of Bondfield and Wilkinson.

Not only was she from a wealthy background, but she had served as a Conservative London County Councillor.

Her politics changed in 1912 when she gained an insight into the shockingly low wages of council cleaners.

It was then that she came under the influence of Mary McArthur – another stalwart of the new unionism, and organiser of women in the workplace.

Lawrence concluded that, without state intervention to prevent economic injustice, local voluntary institutions were powerless.

In the interwar period Lawrence would serve under Lansbury on Poplar Borough Council, and they were imprisoned together in 1921, as a result of the rates rebellion of that year.

And in 1925, she helped pilot the Widows, Orphans and Old Age Pensions Act through the House of Commons.

This introduced a contributory insurance scheme providing pensions for widows with children.

Like Bondfield, Lawrence lost her seat in 1931, and would not return to Parliament.

The Everyday Economy

In this lecture series, we keep the ethical socialism of George Lansbury alive.

In this particular lecture, I have also paid tribute to the women who shaped and stood alongside him over those turbulent decades.

The impact of Bessie Lansbury cannot be quantified or compared to the impact of Ellen Wilkinson.

In their own way, all these women contributed to what I have today called a politics of everyday life:

Speaking from, and to, the everyday experiences of working people, in their homes, communities and workplaces.

They brought a new perspective to the question Thomas Carlyle had posed:

'What is the condition of the working classes in their houses and in their hearts?'

They drew attention to what I call the everyday economy: those sectors which produce goods and services upon which we depend for a good and healthy society, but which then, and now, are all too frequently undervalued, with workers underpaid, and exploited.

They paid particular attention to the provision of housing; healthcare; financial support for women and especially for widows, and for children; as well as the conditions of women at work.

And it was these questions, too, that Lansbury had addressed leading Poplar Borough Council, and his response to which had landed him in prison.

Under Lansbury's leadership, the council had succeeded in cutting infant mortality, building council homes, restoring libraries, repairing roads and housing, and addressing the crisis of unemployment among men returning from the war.

In this way, he was part of the wave of municipal socialists who first really got to grips with these questions of the everyday economy.

Legacies

It is a privilege to be here today celebrating George Lansbury, a real hero of the East End labour movement.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of delivering the Attlee Memorial Lecture at University College Oxford, and this year John Bew delivered an excellent Aneurin Bevan lecture in Parliament.

But it is so important that we remember the women who played their part every bit as much.

Last year, I helped to set up the inaugural Alice Bacon Memorial Lecture at the University of Leeds.

And I look forward to the day when the next generation of MPs can deliver addresses in honour of Margaret Bondfield, Ellen Wilkinson, Susan Lawrence, or Barbara Castle.

But of course, progress isn't measured in the number of lectures about women who made it to the top.

Especially not while austerity hits women's refuges; women's homelessness keep rising, and, across the board, women remain disproportionately affected by the impact of austerity.

The politics of class and gender remain intertwined today as they did throughout the twentieth century.

A few miles further to the East, it was the industrial struggle of the women at the Ford works in Dagenham which led to the Equal Pay Act, steered through by Barbara Castle.

Childcare provision was one of the proudest legacies of the last Labour Government, and it should remain at the top of Labour's agenda.

It is not just about easing the burden of women.

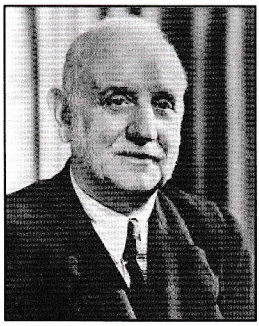
It is about giving working class households and children the freedom and opportunities that others take for granted.

Meanwhile, we continue to devalue the work done disproportionately by women within the home.

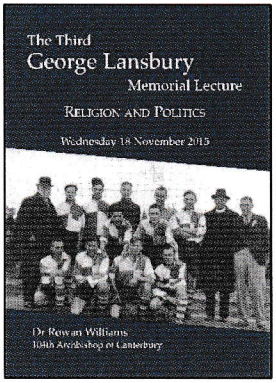
Recognising the burdens on women; securing good pay, good wages and respect for workers in industries dominated by women and on which we all rely:

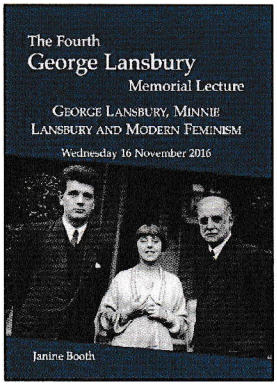
Surely these would be causes George Lansbury, Ellen Wilkinson, Margaret Bondfield and Susan Lawrence would recognise today as being at the forefront of a socialist and a feminist politics for the 21st century.

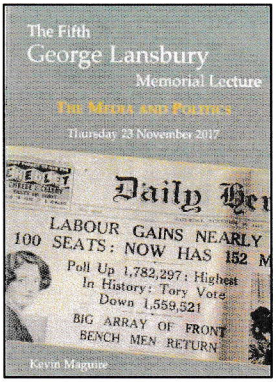
Rachel Jane Reeves is a British economist and Labour Party politician. She has served as the Member of Parliament for Leeds West since 2010.



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 distinguished Christian Socialists in British history, whose campaigning politics sought to apply his faith in public life.







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