

“Isn’t your sister and your daughter and your wife a person?”

Margaret Hinchey: Immigrant, Labour Leader, Suffragette

by Liam Hogan

On 2 February 1914 a delegation of five hundred working women marched on the White House. Their aim was to persuade the President to support women’s suffrage. One of the few chosen to speak to the President was Margaret (Maggie) Hinchey, a laundry worker and Irish immigrant who was “shaking and trembling” to speak on behalf of the “working women of the United States.” She asked him to use his power “to wipe out this great injustice” by granting women the vote. President Woodrow Wilson’s head was bowed as he struggled to elicit an appropriate response “I know, I am in an embarrassing position... my party.” His attempt to sidestep the demand was apparently met with this memorable retort.

President, we women are able to take care of ourselves; that’s why we want the vote. Why, when the men of Limerick were fighting the English, the women of Limerick were fighting too, and they gave the Redcoats a bitter pill to swallow.¹

Who was this remarkable woman speaking truth to power in the White House? Information about Margaret Hinchey’s early life is not conclusive but it’s most likely that she was born in Limerick in 1885.² As is well known there was overwhelming emigration from rural Munster and Connaught to the United States in the nineteenth century due to multiple famines, evictions, crushing poverty and a lack of opportunities. The Hinchey’s were no



Irish American suffrage activist Margaret Hinchey addressing a crowd in New York wearing a “Don’t Be a Scab” sash. Credit: Library of Congress (1915)

and the family emigrated to New York when Margaret was ten years old.³ They were seeking a better life, but things were far from easy in the promised land. Margaret left school when she was 13 and entered the workforce.⁴ Working hours were extremely long, work conditions appalling and often dangerous. Child labour was widespread (by 1910 over 2 million children under age of 16 were working) and many of the workers in the sweatshops and laundries of New York were immigrant women. While some of them were represented by unions their victories had been limited.

One employer that refused to sign any agreement with the unions was the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. On 25 March 1911 a fire started on the 8th

and the next two above it, was occupied by this company, with around 500 of their workers present. Soon all three floors were aflame. The company had previously ordered the steel doors to be locked to “prevent theft” and to guard against the “interruption of work” that would be caused by their employees using the toilets which were off site. The result was that 146 workers died, of which 62 jumped to their deaths trying to escape and 123 of the victims were women.

This was a watershed moment in U.S. labour history. For the majority of suffragists (who were middle class) women’s suffrage was a question of principle and justice, but for the working-class activist it was now seen as an existential issue. They required the vote to change and then enforce

laws which would protect them in the workplace. Margaret Hinchey was then a forewoman in the Langfelder laundry in New York and she soon made this connection, that working conditions could only be improved through labour agitation and legislative change. She joined the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and proceeded to lead a laundry strike on the 1st January 1912 which demanded improved conditions and pay.⁵ The strike grew to over 30,000 women. She testified before the State Arbitration Board, explaining that she worked a 72-hour week, that there were no seats on the work-floor and that male employees had access to the women's dressing room.⁶ Other testimonies before the Board included that of a fifteen-year-old girl, Margaret Corbett, who worked a 52-hour week (constantly standing), had to walk 32 blocks to the laundry each day, and whose middle finger on her right hand had been crushed by a machine while at work. The Arbitration Board declared that the strike was lawful and a deal was eventually reached.

Her natural leadership qualities and her powerful orations were noticed by senior members of the Women's suffrage and labour movement. Leonora O'Reilly, another Irish-American labour activist, asked Margaret to speak at a mass meeting of the Wage Earner's League in April 1912. Her speech was aimed at the anti-suffrage argument that "family was more important than lawmaking" and thus there was no need for women to have the vote.

You cannot call it a family and go home where the working people go for seven short hours to rest their weary bones. The man cannot make both ends meet; the woman goes out to help, and what becomes of the children? She cannot put them in the nursery when she works 14 and 17 hours - those are not nursery hours. She is too tired to give them care and food when she comes home. Then there is the tuberculosis home for them and another job for the undertaker. We want votes for regular hours, better conditions and the enforcement of laws. We have long hours and no sanitary conditions. A mother works

up to the time she brings her baby into the world and four days after she and the baby are laid together in the casket. We get so little for the work of our body, and if we sell our souls we get so much from the man who makes the laws and breaks the laws.⁷

Margaret suffered for her efforts. During the shirt waist strike of 1913 she was arrested and imprisoned. She was convicted of assaulting a forewoman in the factory who broke the picket line. She spent thirty days in 'The Tombs', the city prison in New York for what *Life and Labor* labelled her "brave work as a picket."⁸ In typical fashion this did little to dent her resolve. She sent a cheery telegram from prison to the ongoing biennial convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America which read "Long live the Women's Trade Union League. Greetings to all."⁹ When she was released there were over 200 women waiting to greet her and they cheered as she emerged. Most of those present were members of the Henry Street Settlement and had testified during the court case on Margaret's behalf.¹⁰ She was also blacklisted by employers in the city.

After this Margaret approached the Woman Suffrage Party (WSP) saying "use me in any way you can for the good of the cause."¹¹ In October 1913 she was hired by the WSP as an organiser and "street speaker" to help garner support for women's suffrage among the working class. But Margaret felt that this a two-way street. When she attended the National Suffrage Convention in December she felt uncomfortable among "ladies" who did not understand her perspective or class. She complained to O'Reilly how she felt that she had intruded where she was not wanted and that "not a word of labor was spoken at this convention."¹²

After meeting with the President as part of a delegation in February 1914, Hinchey was to the fore in canvassing support for the suffrage referendum in New York. It is no exaggeration to say that she spoke before tens of thousands of people and convinced them to support the upcoming bill. At a meeting

of the Equal Suffrage League at the Astor Hotel she explained why she was now campaigning for women's suffrage.

The engineers got a raise of \$2 the other day. They have a strong union and votes back of it. They did not have to strike. You never hear of the 'Big Six' striking, but when the shirt waist girls strike they are arrested for asking other girls not to take their positions. We went to the Mayor at that time saying we represented 30,000 women. "Thirty thousand women are nothing to me" he answered. Would he have said that of 30,000 voters?¹³

Her skill in communicating with the working class impressed Jeannette Rankin (Montana's most famous suffragist) and she requested that Hinchey assist her suffrage campaign in Montana. Hinchey was immensely popular in the Treasure State, her speeches which linked women's suffrage with the welfare of working women resonated with the audiences she attracted. In July 1914 she shared a stage (the rear of a motor car!) with Rankin and "several hundred men...with a sprinkling of women...jammed from curb to curb"¹⁴ to hear them speak. The crowd listened that evening for two hours. A local paper referred to Margaret as "an Irish girl, quick witted and enthusiastic" who had "scant opportunity to study books." It was as if the newspaper was reminiscing about Daniel O'Connell when it described how she made her audiences "laugh and weep, but applaud little because they fear to lose a word of her powerful appeal on behalf of women."¹⁵ The *East Oregonian* claimed that Hinchey was "one of the biggest aids to the suffrage campaign."¹⁶ When the voting men of Montana went to the polls on 3 November 1914 they voted in favour of the suffrage bill granting Montana women the vote. Jeannette Rankin later became the first woman elected to Congress in U.S. history.¹⁷

Hinchey returned to New York and began a whirlwind tour of the city and state of New York canvassing for votes for women's suffrage. On 4 May 1915 Hinchey spoke at the first ever suffrage meeting in the Bowery area



Two young strike sympathisers in New York on roller skates wearing sashes that read "Don't be a scab."

Credit: Library of Congress (1915)

of Manhattan at the Vigilance Hotel. According to the *New York Times*, when Maggie got up to speak "the Bowery succumbed to a man."¹⁸ When she asked them if they were going to vote for women's suffrage "every hand went up to say yes, they would vote for the women." During that same speech she showed her disdain for the ongoing War in Europe, and how all the belligerents were "fighting like mad dogs, and don't know what they are fighting about" and it was "them that call themselves Kings and Kaisers that puts them up to it." During the course of her many speeches she also revealed her non-sectarian views on religion "the father says come this way or you will go to hell, and the Protestant says come with me or you'll go to hell, but we are all alike" and "there are different religions, but there is one God and He is constantly driving one thing into our hearts and consciences and that's justice."

She continued her tour of the working-class voters and in June 1915 alongside Lavinia Dock, she endeavored to visit the men excavating the new subway lines on Varick Street. They climbed down

into the trenches carrying a selection of flags and pro-suffrage leaflets; some were decorated with shamrocks, others were translated into Italian, German, Yiddish and Greek. She asked them "brothers are ye going to give us the vote in November?" "Sure, we are!" they cried back.¹⁹ They also visited the piers and spoke with longshoremen, sailors and dock workers.²⁰ A *New York Times* reporter quipped that "there never was a band of suffrage pilgrims who made such a trip as these women."

Following this Hinchey went on the six-week long tour of New York state visiting labour unions, Gaelic societies and Catholic clubs in Rochester, Buffalo, Lockport, Tonawanda, Granite and Niagara Falls. On some occasions Margaret claims that she canvassed up to 300 homes day, leaving suffrage "alive and kicking". She recalls visiting sixty homes in Buffalo in one day and drank nearly sixty cups of tea for the cause

That was some tea, but it was some votes, and while I was drinking my tea and asking pardon of my inside woman for drowning it even with

so good a beverage, the men were signing the slips saying that they would vote for us in November.²¹

Hinchey also claimed that Catholic groups and priests were "coming out more and more for woman suffrage." She cited an Irish priest, Rev. Felix Scullin of Niagara Falls as being particularly supportive. He hoped that she would "convert every man and woman" in his parish and offered her the use of the church hall. She also mentioned a Catholic Society for Woman Suffrage in Buffalo "doing fine work." Despite this gargantuan effort the suffrage initiative in New York was defeated.

But Hinchey kept on fighting. In February 1916 she offered her support to the striking Children's Dressmakers, speaking to their workers in Brooklyn.²² In March 1916 she was one of the WSP members that were anxiously waiting to hear from the Senate Judiciary Committee who had promised (for a 5th time) that they would raise the suffrage bill. The women waited five hours outside only to hear that instead of discussing the bill, the members of

the Committee had left the building through a side-door. Hinchey asked "Is there any man with red blood in his veins who will let these men crucify the women in this way?"²³

In October 1916 she shared the stage with Mother Jones²⁴ at Mozart Hall where 500 wives of car strikers were gathered. Jones urged the women to "play hell with the scabs". They left the hall and began to break the windows of a street car outside. Blanche Brace, a pioneering young female journalist, witnessed the police response which was the indiscriminate use of the baton. She saw an eight-year old child being struck and when she attempted to intervene she was also assaulted. As she put it "there's something revolutionizing in the smooth, chilly feel of a patrolman's club in the small of your back."²⁵

Another vote on suffrage in New York was due in 1917 and Maggie, now labeled the "Irish Thrush of Suffrage", was once again out canvassing. Hinchey was assigned to carry the message of suffrage to the women in the tenement homes to try "to make them realise what it would mean to them and their children." At the WTUL Convention that year she described the plight of these families and she "hoped that a better and brighter day is coming for them through the work that is being done by women's organisations."²⁶ There was also now a change in emphasis in her message. Hinchey was inspired by the 1916 Proclamation and she used it to persuade Irish-American voters that Ireland's most recent martyrs wished to empower women. She wrote an article that appeared in the *Gaelic American* the night before the vote which reminded the Irish that "a year ago in Ireland the new Constitution drawn up by Connolly, McDermott and other Irish patriots contained a clause that granted the ballot to Irish women."²⁷ The suffrage bill passed.

Hinchey, who was became a naturalized U.S citizen in 1917, was relieved of her position by the WSP as they set their sights on a constitutional amendment in Washington D.C. She returned, heart broken, to work

in the laundry. Hinchey wrote to Leonora O'Reilly of her new situation

I lost my bread and also lost the light when I lost my work - now I have to work long hours in darkness and take my rest in a cellar... [...] I see it is not a League for the working women only a political [organisation]...

But Hinchey continued to agitate. She was a fervent supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) which led to her resigning from the WTUL, which now under Rose Schneiderman's leadership opposed the measure. Schneiderman favoured protective legislation but Hinchey believed this would lead to another form of discrimination against working women. As Hinchey predicted protective legislation did lead to women losing their jobs and 1,500 female employees were dismissed because of new restrictions.²⁸ One of these employees was Margaret Hinchey who had found a "good job" as a subway guard, but was now unemployed because of new labour laws which only applied to women working on railroads. Hinchey claims she rang a prominent woman welfare worker to protest what was happening and was told "Well, there's always scrubbing to be done, isn't there?"²⁹

Hinchey joined the National Woman's Party (NWP) initially as a lobbyist and later becoming the Secretary of the Party.³⁰ It was in this role that she met another President of the U.S. In January 1926 a delegation of the NWP marched on the White House and left a petition for the President to support the Equal Rights Amendment. On 18 January President Coolidge met the leaders of the party. Hinchey pleaded the case to him as follows:

The people who are working for the 'welfare' laws do not know what they do to working women. We ask for the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution to prevent the adoption of protective laws which only cost us our good jobs to give us others more poorly paid.³¹

To this day the ERA is still debated and the 113th Congress even reintroduced

the Amendment on the 13 March 2013.

Margaret Hinchey's instincts were to resist and to change a society which treated her primarily as a should-be-mother, secondly as a woman and lastly as a human being. Her efforts to win the vote for women and to empower workers were singularly influential. Leonora O'Reilly fittingly described her as:

clean of thought, pure of heart, brave as truth itself...her strength, her courage and big heart have been at the service of every group of girls struggling for the right to live and enjoy life.³²

She should not be forgotten.

References

1. *The New York Call*, 'She Uses Wit to Win Vote', 13 June 1915
2. There were many Margaret Hinchey's living in New York at this time. The closest match is a Margaret M Hinchey living at No. 323 on West 18th St., New York in 1915. She states she was born in 1885 and emigrated to the U.S. in 1895. Her occupation is listed as 'Lecturer' (New York, State Census 1st June 1915). She was granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, but by 1930 she is living on West 130th Street and working as a 'Laundress' (1930 US Federal Census). This closely matches what we know of her career path. The last official information we can find that matches these details is the 1940 census where she found living on Amsterdam Avenue, New York. We do not know when or where she died.
3. It's possible that the four Hinchey's on the Barque *Amanda* bound for Quebec, which left Limerick on 22 August 1841, were her relatives/ancestors. This ship was lost when it struck a rock near Métis-sur-Mer. All four Hinchey's were drowned, including a Margaret Hinchey. See Tom Donovan, 'Two 1841 Shipping Disasters', *The Old Limerick Journal*, Winter Edition 2005, p. 35
4. *The Daily Missoulian*, 'Margaret Hinchey Comes to Talk Suffrage', 22 July 1914
5. *New York Times*, 'Laundry Trust Plan Revealed By Strike', 2 January 1912
6. *New York Times*, 'Long Hours in Laundries', 17 January 1912
7. *New York Times*, 'Suffrage Demanded by Working Women', 23 April 1912
8. *Life and Labor*, Volumes 3-4, p. 213

9. Proceedings of the Biennial Convention of National Women's Trade Union League of America 1913

10. *New York Times*, 'Welcome Freed Striker', 14 June 1913

11. Quoted in Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America* (Baltimore 1983), p. 101

12. Quoted in James R. Barrett, *The Irish Way: Becoming American in the Multiethnic City* (New York 2012), ebook, n.p.

13. *New York Times*, 'Margaret Hinchey Tells of Wilson', 5 February 1914

14. John C. Board, 'The Lady from Montana', *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1967), p. 3

15. *The Daily Missoulian*, 'Margaret Hinchey Comes to Talk Suffrage', 22 July 1914

16. *East Oregonian*, 'Montana Suffragists Predict 2 to 1 Victory', 22 August 1914

17. In contrast to Emmeline Pankhurst's pro-war advocacy in the UK, Jeannette Rankin refused to support President Wilson's decision to go to war in 1917 stating "I felt

the first time the first woman had a chance to say no to war she should say it."

18. *New York Times*, 'Suffragists Leave For Albany Today', 5 May 1915

19. *New York Times*, 'Subway's Diggers Cheers Suffragists', 30 June 1915

20. *New York Times*, 'Women Win Votes of Longshoremen', 13 July 1915

21. *New York Times*, 'Took 60 Cups O' Tea For As Many Votes', 5 September 1915

22. *New York Times*, 'Needle-Girl Strike Wins Suffrage Aid', 11 February 1916

23. *New York Times*, 'Suffragists Assail Senate For Delay', 17 March 1916

24. Mary G. Harris Jones (1837-1930), known as Mother Jones, was an Irish-born American schoolteacher and dressmaker who became a prominent organized labour representative and community organizer. She helped coordinate major strikes and cofounded the Industrial Workers of the World.

25. *New-York Tribune*, 'Women Stone Cars;

Clubbed By Police', 6 October 1916

26. Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial Convention of the National Women's Trade Union League of America 1917

27. Quoted in Tara McCarthy, 'Woman Suffrage and Irish Nationalism: ethnic appeals and alliances in America', *Women's History Review*, Published online 20 Feb 2014

28. James T. Kenneally, 'The Catholic Struggle for an Equal Rights Amendment, 1923-1945', *The Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (Apr., 1989), p. 253

29. *New York Times*, 'Women to march on White House and Demand Equal Rights With Men in Industrial Field', 11 January 1926

30. *New York Times*, 'Working Women Ask Coolidge's Aid', 18 January 1926

31. *New York Times*, 'Coolidge See Duty to Women Workers', 19 January 1926

32. Hasia R. Diner, op. cit. p. 101



Margaret Hinchey leading a protest group. She served as the head of the Laundry Workers Union of New York. Credit: Library of Congress (February 1914)

Liam Hogan is a librarian and historian based in Limerick City Library. He is a graduate of the University of Limerick and Aberystwyth University. His special research interests are racialised chattel slavery, the politics of memory, unfree labour in the Atlantic world and power. He has published work with openDemocracy, theJournal.ie, *Old Limerick Journal*, *History Ireland*, *The Irish Story* and *Rabble* magazine. He was recently interviewed by the Southern Poverty Law Centre about his work on the appropriation and distortion of Irish history by white supremacists.