

AFD Ep 352 Links and Notes - Helen Keller was a Radical Leftist [Bill/Rachel/Kelley] - Recording Feb 21

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Keller (1880-1968)
- One caveat we will address later in the episode is her brief dabbling in certain eugenics ideas popular with her contemporaries, but she also believed that socialism was the only solution to a better life for blind and deaf people
- Her education was funded by Standard Oil tycoon Henry Huttleston Rogers, who she became linked to via Mark Twain, whose finances were handled by Rogers
- She joined the IWW after the 1912 Lawrence textile mill strike (which we covered previously <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2019/08/13/lend-lease-10-american-anarchy-part-1-syndicalist-theory-and-iww-practice/>) and explicitly supported its anti-electoral tendencies and questioned parliamentary socialism
- Co-founder of the ACLU in 1920 like a number of other prominent leftists https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/facts.pdf
- Socialist Party member and supporter of Eugene V. Debs presidential candidacies (not sure if it's correct that she supported all 4 times)
- Anti-war
- She frequently clashed with newspaper editors and publishers over her socialist views, especially as she became more vocal about them and they realized she was serious
- <https://www.perkins.org/stories/seven-fascinating-facts-you-probably-didnt-know-about-helen-keller>
- <https://www.workers.org/2016/03/24250/>
 - “Keller was decidedly a person who thought for herself. She was born in 1880 near Tuscumbia, Ala., to a Confederate veteran — a plantation owner who had previously enslaved people of African descent. Keller was raised on the farm during the violently racist post-Reconstruction era when Southern plantation owners and Northern capitalists were striking deals for de facto re-enslavement of recently freed Black people.”
 - “Keller identified her Marxist analysis and her socialism as deeply interconnected with her disability activism. As she studied economics, she visited factories and felt the very vibrations of the brutal industrial conditions that resulted in worker injuries. She concluded that the main causes of disability in the U.S. were industrial and workplace accidents and sickness from owners placing profits above worker safety.”
 - “In a 1924 letter to social reformer U.S. Sen. Robert La Follette, she replied: “So long as I confine my activities to social service and the blind, they compliment me extravagantly, calling me ‘arch priestess of the sightless,’ ‘wonder woman,’ and a ‘modern miracle.’ But when it comes to a discussion of poverty, and I maintain that it is the result of wrong economics — that the industrial system under which we live is at the root of much of the physical deafness and blindness in the world — that is a different matter!”
 - Keller read Marx, Engels, and other socialist texts in German Braille.
 - Had a quick and sharp tongue and once referred to Rockefeller as a “monster of capitalism”. (This is relatively tame language, but goes to show she was not the passive disabled person that history books make her out to be...)
 - Continued to defend her leftists politics even while Communism was considered such a threat in the US.
- <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/05/helen-keller-her-scathing-letter-to-german-students-planning-to-burn-her-book.html>

- In 1933 upon learning that Germany students planned to burn copies of her books, she wrote the following letter -
- To the student body of Germany:

History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.

You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds. I gave all the royalties of my books for all time to the German soldiers blinded in the World War with no thought in my heart but love and compassion for the German people.

I acknowledge the grievous complications that have led to your intolerance; all the more do I deplore the injustice and unwisdom of passing on to unborn generations the stigma of your deeds.

Do not imagine that your barbarities to the Jews are unknown here. God sleepeth not, and He will visit His judgment upon you. Better were it for you to have a mill-stone hung around your neck and sink into the sea than to be hated and despised of all men.

- <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/helen-keller>
 - Hellen Keller's political awareness was connected to Ann Sullivan's husband, John Macy, who has a social critic and Harvard instructor. Keller lived with Sullivan and Macy and her awareness of and commitment to these ideas blossomed with access to these socialist circles.
- <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/fbi-report-names-hollywood-figures-as-communists>
 - Keller's political activities resulted in her being under the watchful eye of the FBI for most of her adult life. She was even named as a communist in an FBI report along with many other prominent Hollywood and cultural figures.
- <https://isreview.org/issue/96/politics-helen-keller>
 - Here is what the *Detroit Free Press* wrote about her in 1914:

As long as Miss Keller appears before the public in the light of a member of society struggling nobly under great handicaps and furnishing by her example inspiration for others who are unfortunately placed, she does a valuable work.

But the moment she undertakes to speak ex cathedra, as it were, of all the political and social problems of the day, she receives a consideration out of all proportion to her fund of knowledge and judgment.

Helen Keller, struggling to point the way to the light for the deaf, dumb and blind is inspiring. Helen Keller preaching socialism; Helen Keller passing on the merits of the copper strike; Helen Keller sneering at the constitution of the United States; Helen Keller under these aspects is pitiful. She is beyond her depth. She speaks with the handicap of limitation which no amount of determination or science can overcome. Her knowledge is, and must be, almost purely theoretical, and unfortunately this world and its problems are both very practical.

One recent Keller biography, written by disability studies professor Kim Nielsen, advances a number of important criticisms of Keller's disability politics.³⁴ She correctly condemns an article written by Keller in 1915 during a brief moment when she had adopted certain eugenicist ideas.³⁵ Influenced greatly by her friend and then-comrade Margaret Sanger, Keller conflated the struggle for birth control and reproductive self-determination with the broader social goal of ensuring the "fitness" of future generations. To be fair, Keller never supported the more odious and racist aspects of eugenic philosophy, such as forced sterilization (a practice legalized by the US Supreme Court in 1927). In any event, within a matter of years, Keller was writing articles denouncing the entire "survival of the fittest" mentality upon which eugenics was founded, not only in Nazi Germany, but in the United States as well.

- Keller was a Christian Socialist, adopting the philosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg. She used the Bible as allegory and saw the highest goal of Christianity was to improve humanity's condition on earth while still believing in an immortal soul. *Believing that the essence of the gospel was "the supreme and equal worth of each individual soul," she insisted "there is no peace between the teachings of Christ and any form of slavery."*
- *"What are you committed to," an interviewer asked her in 1916, "education or revolution?"*

"Revolution," Keller replied:

We can't have education without revolution. We have tried peace education for 1,900 years and it has failed. Let us try revolution and see what it will do now. . . . I am not for peace at all hazards. I regret this war [World War I], but I have never regretted the blood of the thousands spilled during the French Revolution. And the workers are learning how to stand alone. They are learning a lesson they will apply to their own good out in the trenches. . . . Under the obvious battle waging there is an invisible battle for the freedom of man.

In her later years, she decried the imperialism of post WWII-USA, and spoke out against McCarthyism and anti-Communist fervor. She turned her support toward the Third World countries asserting independence, such as the newly independent India. She also started to distance herself from her former pro-Soviet views. She saw the Cold War as the fault of both the USA and the USSR. While never fully turning her back on Socialism, she started to consider herself a "non-Communist". Many of her biographers

imply that she became a liberal in her later years, but her socialist views simply evolved over time. She never embraced capitalism.

“I have never had a tolerant view of the character, objectives and flaws of capitalism,” Keller wrote in 1950, “and I fear I am incorrigible. A very few of the rich whom I meet appeal to me eloquently, and are ready to surrender their all for the good of humanity if need be, but I have never felt close to them even before I became a Socialist.”

Also referenced this week:

<http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2020/11/24/nov-22-2020-the-execution-of-the-songwriter-joe-hill-by-the-murderous-capitalist-class-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-334/>