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Jun 7, 9:30 am EC

Bright Lights' screening 'Her Socialist Smile,' shines light on Helen Keller's activism



Helen Keller, with her secretary and close friend, Polly Thompson.

By <u>Lucia Thorne</u>

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In Emerson's latest Bright Lights film screening on April 7 and 8, "Her Socialist Smile" delves into Helen Keller's affinity for the implementation of socialism, ending the exploitation of the working class, and her work as a sociopolitical public speaker.

Directed by Emerson professor John Gianvito and narrated by Carolyn Forché, the film uses striking shots of nature paired with historical footage to bring Keller's words to life. It highlights how ahead of her time she was in her advocacy, and how society has failed to evolve sufficiently since her words were first spoken.

Born in Tuscumbia, Alabama in 1880, <u>Keller</u> was a healthy child until she turned about a year and a half old, when she became sick (believed to be Rubella), causing her to lose her sight and hearing.

At age seven, Keller began learning to read and write at Perkins School for the Blind with teacher and lifelong friend Anne Sullivan. She began teaching Keller how to communicate, mainly through writing out words on her palm. This form of communication eventually led Keller to learn to read, write, and later, speak.

Keller became a public advocate for people with disabilities, emphasizing how ableism has continuously forced people with disabilities into the working class. Eventually, Keller began speaking on her belief that socialism is necessary to solve societal ills against the working class—the aspect of Keller's life that the film focuses on. Socialism is defined by Britannica as the "social and economic doctrine that calls for public rather than private ownership or control of property and natural resources."

Keller's first public speech, "The Heart and the Hand," given on Feb. 6, 1913, signified a new era for her. Her passion for the institution of socialist ideals became known to the public, and her lecturing career began.

"Charity covers a multitude of sins. It does something worse than that," Keller said during her speech. "It covers the facts so that they cannot be seen. It covers the fact that the property of the few is made by the labor of the many.... My blindness does not shut me out from a knowledge of what is happening about me."

Keller used her platform to encourage other people with visual impairments to study socialist literature, "not for theory, as it is scornfully called, but for facts about the labor conditions in America," she wrote in a 1911 editorial for Matilda Ziegler Magazine for the Blind.

In 1913, Keller released her book *Out of the Dark*, a collection of letters encompassing her life and her beliefs in the importance of socialism, leading to criticisms regarding her credibility.

"States one newspaper editorial, 'Helen Keller, struggling to point the way 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," narrator Carolyn Forché reads in the documentary. "She is beyond her depth. She speaks with the handicap of limitation, which no amount of determination and science can overcome. Her knowledge is and must be almost purely theoretical, and unfortunately, this world and its problems are both very practical."

Despite these criticisms, she continued her crusade for change, speaking out <u>against racism</u>, U.S. involvement in World War I, and the capitalistic exploitation of the working class.

"I do not believe that any sex, class, or race can safely trust its protection in any hands but its own," Keller said.

In the past year, Keller's words have rung true more than ever. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, the inequities that have been deeply rooted in our society for countless generations have only been highlighted further, from the loss of millions of jobs and the inequitable healthcare system, to systemic racism, more specifically shown in law enforcement with the murder of George Floyd and many other unarmed Black people.

If we have learned anything over the past year, and from this documentary, it should be that change is clearly necessary and we must be the ones to bring that change.

"Be not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction, be heroes in an army of construction," Keller once said.

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