

Primary Source - Doris Stevens, Account of NWP Picketing (1920)

Source: Doris Stevens, *Jailed for Freedom*, New York, August 1920.

On the first arrests of the pickets, June 26, 1917

There was the criticism in the press and on the lips of men that we were embarrassing our Government before the eyes of foreign visitors. ..Of course it was embarrassing. We meant it to be. The truth must be told at all costs. This was not time for manners.

Hurried conferences behind closed doors! Summoning of the military to discuss declaring a military zone around the White House! ...Closing the Woman's Party headquarters was discussed. Perhaps a raid! And all for what? Because women were holding banners asking for the precious principle at home that men were supposed to be dying for abroad.

Finally a decision was reached embodying the combined wisdom of all the various conferees. The Chief of Police, Major Pullman, was detailed to "request" us to stop "picketing" and to tell us that if we continued to picket, we would be arrested.

"We have picketed for six months without interference," said Miss Paul. "Has the law been changed?"

"No," was the reply, "but you must stop it."

"But, Major Pullman, we have consulted our lawyers and know we have a legal right to picket."

"I warn you, you will be arrested if you attempt to picket again."

The following day Miss Lucy Burns and Miss Katharine Morey of Boston carried to the White House gates [a banner reading] "We shall fight for the things we have always held nearest our hearts, for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government," and were arrested...

Miss Burns and Miss Morey upon arriving at the police station, insisted, to the great surprise of all the officials, upon knowing the charge against them. Major Pullman and his entire staff were utterly at a loss to know what to answer. The Administration had looked ahead only as far as threatening arrest. They doubtless thought this was all they would have to do. People could not be arrested for picketing. Picketing is a guaranteed right under the Clayton Act of Congress. Disorderly conduct? There had been no disorderly conduct. Inciting to riot? Impossible! The women had stood as silent sentinels holding the President's own eloquent words."

Doors opened and closed mysteriously. Officials and subofficials passed hurriedly to and fro. Whispered conversations were heard... Hours passed. Finally the two prisoners were pompously told that they had "obstructed the traffic" on Pennsylvania Avenue....

...When the Administration refused to grant the demands of the prisoners and of that portion of the public which supported them, for the rights of political prisoners, it was decided to resort to the ultimate protest-weapon inside prison. A hunger strike was undertaken....

Little is known in this country about the weapon of the hunger strike. And so at first it aroused tremendous indignation. "Let them starve to death," said the thoughtless one, who did not perceive that that was the very thing a political administration could least afford to do. "Mad fanatics," said a kindlier critic. The general opinion was that the hunger strike was "foolish."

During the suffrage campaign in England this weapon was used for the double purpose of forcing the release of imprisoned militant suffragettes and of compelling the British government to act....

With thirty determined women on hunger strike, of whom eight were in a state of almost total collapse, the Administration capitulated. It would not afford to feed thirty women forcibly and risk the social and political consequences; nor could it let thirty women starve themselves to death, and likewise taken the consequences... And so all the prisoners were unconditionally released on November 27th and November 28th.... Immediately following the release of the prisoners and the magnificent demonstration of public support of them ... political events happened thick and fast. Committees on Congress acted on the amendment. President Wilson surrendered and a date for the vote was set.