

6c - Starving for the Right to Vote

After completing her historic cross-country trip, Sara Bard Field helped organize the National Women's Party (NWP) in 1916. The NWP absorbed the Congressional Union and embraced its militant philosophy. Unlike its larger sister organization, the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), the NWP was not content just to circulate petitions, write letters to newspapers and elected officials, and engage in other lawful means of campaigning for suffrage. Instead, the NWP used confrontation and pressure to achieve its ends.

Fed up with President Woodrow Wilson's foot-dragging over supporting a federal women's suffrage amendment, the NWP started sending pickets to the White House in 1916. For the next year and a half, in snowstorms and torrential rain, and during Washington's hot, humid summers, the NWP pickets protested in front of the White House. The demonstrators ranged in age from young college women to grandmothers in their 80s. They carried eye-catching banners demanding justice. "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?" read one sign. But the White House gates were clamped shut, and Wilson ignored them.

Women came from across the nation to help picket, and if they couldn't come, they sent a representative. Mrs. S. H. B. Gray of Colorado wrote, "I have no son to give my country to fight for democracy abroad, and so I send my daughter to Washington to fight for democracy at home." At first, the public eagerly supported the pickets. But after the United States entered World War I in April 1917, public support turned to hostility. Any form of dissent against the government was considered treasonous. The police began to arrest the demonstrators, usually on the flimsy charge of obstructing traffic.

Judges sentenced some women while dismissing others. But suffragists refused to recognize the court's authority over them. NWP leader Alice Paul sternly informed one judge: "We do not consider ourselves subject to this court, since as an unenfranchised class we have nothing to do with the making of the laws which have put us in this position."

Judges beseeched the demonstrators to pay the fines — only a few dollars — but they almost always chose imprisonment instead. About 168 women served time in prison, many in Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia.

Jail conditions were dreadful. The picketers endured spoiled, wormy food, filthy sheets and blankets, putrid open toilets that could be flushed only from outside their cells and thus at the whim of guards, rats and cockroaches, lack of ventilation, and even solitary confinement.

Some picketers went on a hunger strike to protest the violation of their right to see a lawyer and their treatment as criminals instead of political prisoners. Jail authorities resorted to forced feeding. Mrs. Lawrence Lewis, a grandmother, described one forced feeding: "I was seized and laid on my back, where five people held me, a young colored woman leaping upon my knees, which seemed to break under the weight. Dr. Gannon [the prison physician] then forced the tube through my lips and down my throat, I gasping and suffocating with the agony of it. I didn't know where to breathe from, and everything turned black when the fluid began pouring in."

Lucy Burns, the chief organizer in the NWP, was fed through the nose. She managed to smuggle a note out of jail describing her ordeal: "Was stretched on bed ... [and] held down by five people at legs, arms and head. I refused to open mouth. Gannon pushed the tube up left nostril. I turned and twisted my head all I could, but he managed to push it up. It hurt nose and throat very much and makes nose bleed freely. Tube drawn out covered with blood."

From August to November 1917, the abusive treatment by prison authorities worsened. One night in November — later known as "the Night of Terror" — the guards at Occoquan Workhouse savagely beat the suffragists. Among the prisoners was Dorothy Day, radical journalist and social reformer. Two guards wrenched Day's arms above her head, lifted her up and slammed her body twice over the back of an iron bench.

Lucy Burns was handcuffed to her cell door and threatened with a gag when she protested. Guards threw other suffragists against the wall of a cell; one even suffered a heart attack but was denied medical care.

The NWP skillfully publicized the picketers' plight. They asked congressmen to visit the prisons and sent out speakers, who shared with audiences accounts of fresh abuses. In December 1917, Wilson pardoned

all of the suffragists, and the arrests ended temporarily. But by the summer of 1918, protesters were again arrested and jailed, and some went on hunger strikes, although prison officials refrained from using excessive force. The heroic suffragists who chose to go to prison risked losing not only their freedom but their lives for the right to vote.
