

Making a Difference

The Queensland Labour Movement and Women's Suffrage Campaign for One Adult, One Vote

We acknowledge the First Nations peoples, and we support the Uluru statement for the Heart. Turrbul and Yaggera people have and had very different systems of governance, gender relations and community participation.

...'With reason and conviction and a good deal of fear' [Nettie Palmer] Did early white feminists demonstrate? Hold mass processions? Engage in Direct Action? Break shop windows? Stand on soap boxes to give speeches? Wear white dresses? Face physical danger? Go on hunger strikes? Destroy property?

Stop One: Petitions Monument and Old Trades Hall. 1894 [Corner Albert, Turbot Streets, south side]

- The right to petition was one of the very few forms of legal political expression. Petitions were key to the international women's suffrage movement with early successes in New Zealand (1893) and South Australia (1894).
- Re-ignites the women's movement in Brisbane when a series of huge public meeting establishes the **Women's Equal Franchise Association**. First item on the agenda of the WEFA are petitions: two—one for women to sign,—one for men to sign. 7,900 and 3,600 signatures are collected. You can check them out <https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/explore/history/suffrage>
- When WEFA thinks they have the numbers, and Labor leader Thomas Glassey's electoral reform bill is before parliament, they present the petitions. Forty suffrage women in the parliament's visitors' gallery *dressed in white* ignore signs to remain seated. The balcony barricaded them upstairs as they were forced to watch their petitions fail. Filibustered and delayed, the early Liberal supporters fell apart.
- WEFA with "Mother of Labour" Emma Miller as president and Catherine Hughes as secretary lead the campaign for the next eleven years brilliantly. Male members can join, but have no voting rights.

Stop Two: School of Arts [166 Ann Street]

- In 1894 extraordinary writer socialist feminist Leontine Cooper although elected secretary of WEFA, withdraws to form a women-only group, the **Women's Franchise League**. Immediately they start another petition for the vote on the same terms as men, whatever they be. Cooper believes the call for one-woman-one-vote will slow down getting the women's vote (WA women get property vote in 1899).
- Cooper edits a suffrage newspaper *The Star* covering all aspects of the women's movement, labour and conservatives, and the Women's Christian Temperance Movement. She continued to write a regular Queensland column for Louisa Lawson's suffrage journal *Dawn*.
- The conservative **Queensland Women's Electoral League** held its formative meeting here much later after the federal vote in 1903.

Stop Three: Women's Unions [King George (Market) Square, Speaker's Corner]

- To understand the spectacular achievements of the Labour movement leadership of the women's movement we have to go right back to the beginnings of Queensland, its establishment as a military penal colony where most women were assumed to be prostitutes and any could be strip searched and locked up if the authorities believed they had venereal disease. A larger petition than for the vote in Queensland, was the petition for the removal of the Contagious Diseases Act. This issue galvanised women.
- The next important factor is the timing of Queensland's separation from NSW. While the other colonies in the 1850s had manhood suffrage, Queensland did not, so the squattocracy became even more entrenched and powerful. In 1894 when Glassey tabled the WEFA petition he claimed that there were 77,000 women eligible to vote in Queensland and 57,000 men disenfranchised (who neither met property nor residential qualifications). At this time women with property could vote in the council elections.

Working women in dire straits, at half male pay rates, could not join unions. In 1890, they formed a Women's Union. May Jordan O'Connell was appointed a labour organiser. Women-only unions went on to be represent women in different industries, but involvement was intermittent. Wages boards ignored them.

- In 1891, Queensland had another first. Six women were appointed as Royal Commissioners on the inquiry into working conditions in Shops and Factories. Included among the six were Leontine Cooper and a woman we know little about, Sarah Bailey from the Women's Union, representing the Labour movement. Calling in all kinds of employers, politicians and workers, Emma Miller also gave evidence on the exploitation of piece workers.
- This was all incredibly valuable experience for what happened at the 1894 meetings when the Labour movement took leadership of the women's movement. It was Sarah Bailey who moved the successful motion from the floor of the public meeting with an amendment about one woman one vote, picked up by Emma Miller on the platform who called for a show of hands. And this praxis, this powerful commitment to justice and capacity to implement it was to be repeated right across the regions, in Bundaberg, in Gympie where huge meetings were held and often two organisations formed in the same space. Branches of WEFA were established across the suburbs and regions.

Stop Four: Boomerang Broadway Arcade [133 Adelaide St]

- Media, then as now, was crucial. The weekly socialist newspaper *Boomerang* was edited by William Lane, and his American wife wrote a column for it. Leontine Cooper also regularly wrote for it; it was vital in providing a forum for the women's movement and airing debates. Leontine Cooper, however, was critical of the male dominated unions; Lane attacked her as bourgeois. When he took over editing the *Worker* from 1890, he no longer published her work, but the *Worker* was important in supporting WEFA but not always and as Leontine Cooper warned did not support women standing for parliament until late. In 1894 after the extraordinary bad publicity about their slug fest, the women learnt not to disagree in public, held no joint public meetings.

Stop Five: First Brisbane Town Hall [Queen Street opp. Myers Centre]

The first Queensland suffrage organisation, the **Women's Suffrage League** was formed in 1889 and they held their first public meeting in the town hall. The mayor's wife, Mrs Clark was the secretary and they had nearly 100 paid up members. While no records have surfaced yet, it seems the group fell apart by 1891 over the issue of qualifications for the vote. Their preferred option was the residential qualification, but many women wanted one adult one vote. They lobbied for the successful right of married women to hold property in 1890.

Stop Six: Parliament House [Speaker's Corner]

Why was the courageous Labour movement leadership of the women's movement crucial to the suffrage campaign? WEFA worked tirelessly to hold politicians across the board accountable on the women's vote. They worked tirelessly to support Labor politicians to both get them into office and when they were in parliament. And they consolidated the social networks of the labour movement.

In 1903, with the first federal vote for women, a meeting was called to form the Queensland Women's Electoral Lobby— at the School of Arts. Explicitly anti-socialist, labour women pulled out and formed the **Women Workers' Political Organisation** partly as a lobby group, partly to educate women workers on how to vote, *armed to the teeth and ready for all emergencies*. Also formed in the regions, the WWPOs were closely networked with the widespread WPOs in which many women were active in leadership roles.

In 1904 with a Labor Liberal coalition government, when the electoral reform bill was passed in the Legislative Assembly but was blocked by the upper house, the WWPO held a 'public indignation' meeting at the Centennial Hall, the same building of the 1894 meetings. Emma Miller led the crowd on a deputation to the premier who recalled the parliament in the heat of summer to finally push through the bill in **1905**.

In **1915**, with a full Labor government, women won the right to stand for parliament, but when Helen Huxham stood for Labor Party pre-selection in 1917 she was only half way up the list. Queensland women never voted for the upper house which was abolished in 1922.

In 1962 First Nations people achieved the federal vote, and in 1965 the state Queensland vote.

Acknowledgements and further reading<https://hecate.communications-arts.uq.edu.au/files/4639/Centenary%20of%20Women%27s%20Suffrage%20in%20Queensland.pdf>