

## **Statement for 93<sup>rd</sup> Birthday of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom**

Today we mark an important anniversary - the birth in 1915 of the organisation that came to be known as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom - WILPF.

WILPF's links to the women's suffrage movement are well known. In the early days of World War I, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) was divided on the whole question of the war:

*“ A few notable Suffrage Alliance leaders enthusiastically supported the war effort, and plans for the organization's 1915 international gathering in Berlin had been halted.”*

But Aletta Jacobs, president of the Dutch suffrage movement, was one of those suffragists undaunted. She wrote:

*“But I thought at once, just because there is this terrible war the women must come together somewhere, just to show that women of all countries can work together even in the face of the greatest war in the world.”*

One Christmas Eve during that “greatest war in the world”, German soldiers on the battlefield put up Christmas trees lit with candles and English, French and German soldiers sang “Silent Night, Holy Night/ Stille Nacht! Heil'ge Nacht!”. They sang together – in German, in English and maybe in French - and came together across their trenches first to bury their dead and then they exchanged gifts with each other – chocolate cake, cognac, tobacco, postcards, newspapers. But the generals hated this international mateship. They ordered their troops to resume shooting at each other.

It's hardly surprising that governments were fiercely opposed to people from opposing “sides” of the war coming together in common purpose. According to their lights, divisions had to be whipped up in order to enable the continued conduct of the war. Without divisions between people, there could be no war.

So at a time during the first World War when people's fears were being savagely exploited under the guise of nationalism and patriotism, WILPF's founding foremothers demonstrated magnanimity of vision and huge courage in daring to come together across the nations to oppose the killing of women's sons by other women's sons on the battlefields of Europe. According to one woman who later became one of WILPF's Nobel prize-winning International Presidents – one of WILPF's *two* Nobel Peace Prize winning International WILPF presidents – Emily Greene Balch:

*“The women, 1500 of them and more, have come together and for four days conferred, not on remote and abstract questions but on the vital subject of international relations. English, Scottish, German, Austrian, Hungarian,*

*Italian, Polish, Belgian, Dutch, American, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish were all represented.”*

What a feat to bring together in the face of fierce government opposition women from both sides of that conflict!

To quote Aletta Jacobs again:

*“I ... invited as many women as I could reach in different countries to discuss together what the congress should be and to make a preliminary program. When the answers came, so many were in favour that I thought, “Now I dare to do it”.*

Coming out of their founding congress in The Hague in 1915, these women established two small delegations to present a peace plan to the heads of state of thirteen warring and neutral nations. Their purpose was to assemble a panel of neutral states for “continuous mediation of the conflict”. They were for mediation and talking around the negotiation table rather than suffering and slaughter on the battlefield. Or in Churchill’s words: “Jaw, jaw is better than war, war.”

Jane Addams, the other of our two International Presidents to have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, led one of the delegations. She wrote of one of their visits:

*“We went into the office of another high official, a large, grizzled, formidable man. When we had finished our presentation and he said nothing, I remarked, “It perhaps seems to you very foolish that women should go about this way; after all, the world is so strange in this war situation that our mission may be no more strange nor foolish than the rest.”*

*He banged his fist on the table. “Foolish?” he said. “Not at all. These are the first sensible words that have been uttered in this room for 10 months.”*

This concept of *a panel of neutral states for continuous mediation of conflicts* was later reflected in the formation of the League of Nations for whose founding the WILPF women worked very hard, and still later in its successor, the United Nations - with which WILPF has consultative status.

Ninety-three years on, as we celebrate our 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday, women of WILPF are still daring to do it - to study, make known and help abolish the political, social, economic and psychological causes of war, and to work for a constructive peace.

Thanks one and all, to every WILPF woman, for being so persistent – and so daring!

28/4/2008

*For Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Australian Section)*

*by Cathy Picone and Ruth Russell, Joint National Coordinators*

*Email: wilpfaustralia@wilpf.org.au*

*Web: <http://www.wilpf.org.au>*