

National Union

AR/646

November 4th, 1909.

Dear Miss Phillips,

I am desired to forward to the National Union Executive Committee the enclosed statement from the Election Committee of the London Society for Women's Suffrage.

The Bermondsey poll opened at 8 a.m., and at that hour two representatives of the National Union took up their position at each of the six polling stations with flags flying and the petition to be signed by the voters in favour of Women's Suffrage. For three hours everything went favourably. Numerous signatures were obtained at each polling booth, and Suffragists had every reason to feel pleased. About 11 o'clock, at Laxon Street polling station, took place the now notorious interference with the ballot box by a member of the Women's Freedom League, followed shortly afterwards by the much more serious occurrence at Boutcher School station, in the Grange Road.

It was by the changed behaviour of the authorities and voters towards us that our members first became aware that something untoward had occurred. Everywhere anger was loudly expressed against Suffragists, and in most forcible language electors were refusing to sign our petitions. We then learnt that an attempt to invalidate the election had been made, and had resulted in injury to an official which, as vouched for by the doctor to one of the members of our committee, might have the gravest consequences. Another member had obtained an official intimation from the Women's Freedom League that she assumed full responsibility for the action of the members, who had acted under instructions.

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I am desired to add to the above statement that the action of the Committee appeared to have the support of the majority of National Union workers present of whom there was a considerable number present. Complaints were made by three or four but to the best of the belief of this Committee only by persons who are not in accordance with the policy formally reaffirmed by the Council Meeting at Cardiff.

My Committee regret to report that the difficulty of the position at Bermondsey was much increased by the presence of women suffragists who belonged both to the National Union and to one or other of the militant Societies. On one side a worker for the Freedom League loudly proclaimed at the polling station that she was a member of the London Society - whilst on the other side a worker for the National Union, with equal vehemence announced that if the accident at the polling station had befallen Mr Asquith she should have rejoiced in it.

Yours faithfully,

P.S.

We hastily called a meeting of our Election Committee to consult on what should be our course of action in the changed conditions which had now arisen. It was unanimously decided that our most imperative duty was at once to dissociate ourselves in the eyes of the authorities, of the electors, of the Bermondsey public, and of the Press from all suspicion of participation in or sympathy with what had taken place at the polling booths; if we were unsuccessful in doing this, we felt that our efforts to win over Bermondsey to the cause of Women's Suffrage would have been rendered fruitless. To protest alone was insufficient; was there any action we could take which would prove our sincerity? There seemed to be one and one only; all the morning the members of the National Union had been standing with their petitions at the polling stations side by side with the representatives of the two militant societies. We resolved at once to withdraw from all the polling booths, to cease our now useless endeavours to get our petitions signed, and, with this ocular demonstration of our good faith to point to, spend our energies in convincing the public that the cause of Women's Suffrage was not identified with lawlessness. To this end we decided, notwithstanding the excited state of feeling in the community to explain our position at a public open-air meeting in the Tower Bridge Road Triangle (the most populous centre of the constituency), at 6 p.m., and notices to this effect were at once issued. The result amply justified our determination. The meeting, at which all the members of the Election Committee were present, besides other members of the National Union, was a large and representative one; we expressed our grief and indignation at the occurrence which had taken place and our hope and belief that our audience would not permit the justice of our cause to be overshadowed by the mistaken means adopted by others to forward it. We were listened to with the deepest attention, and our statement was received with respect and comprehension.

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The following night a magnificent meeting was held in the Town Hall, at which the announcement of our decision to remain in the constituency was received with enthusiasm.

All of us who were on the spot are satisfied that we did succeed in dissociating the cause of women's suffrage from a necessary connection with violence and disorder, and that this result was well worth obtaining by the sacrifice of a petition which in the circumstances must have proved insignificant.