Peace Petition 1932

Why did WILPF collect six million signatures in 1932 - and did it do any good?

In 1926, when the WILPF Congress meeting in Dublin took the theme 'Next Steps toward Peace', Camille Drevet outlined action for WILPF members:

"To talk of liberty and peace is necessary, but more than this is necessary; we must by our daily acts bring such pressure to bear on public opinion, the press and education that the nations will be forced to disarm."

Later in the Congress, Adela Coit proposed that the WILPF women should urge the implementation of a system of international arbitration as a first step toward disarmament:

"While appreciating the essential interdependence of the three principles of disarmament, security and arbitration, we yet believe that in practice the latter must be applied first. Before nations will disarm they must feel more secure than they do at present, and before they can feel more secure they must know beforehand that other countries have undertaken not to go to war without submitting a quarrel to some form of impartial settlement. There must be an alternative instrument offered them, other than war, as a means of settling disputes - an instrument to whose use each and every nation is pledged in advance...... if nations are once pledged to the principle of arbitration, the resultant sense of security quite apart from the question of sanctions, will lift the whole course of foreign relations onto a different plane."

This statement was based on her experience where in 1925, WILPF joined with other groups in Britain, to present an Arbitration Petition of 500,000 signatures to the British Foreign Office. They then organised the 1926 Peace pilgrimage to highlight the arbitration petition, and alert people to the importance of disarmament issues, just as the Preparatory Commission for the proposed Disarmament Conference met in Geneva.

As the Disarmament Conference drew nearer, WILPF women in USA organised a Peace Caravan that travelled from Hollywood, 9000 miles across America to Washington, where, in January 1932, Jane Addams alongside 700 supporters presented President Hoover with a petition carrying half a million signatures, urging US delegation to work for 'real' disarmament.

On 2 February 1932 the first World Disarmament Conference opened in Geneva with representatives from 60 countries. 'War raged in Far East, unemployment blanketed the USA, Europe shivered on the threshold of new chaos - and as the 'peacemakers' assembled the world held its breath and waited for the words and deeds of hope.'

The hopes of ordinary people lay piled in despatch boxes in the library of the Conference Hall. From women’s organisations alone, 8 million signatures were presented at the receiving ceremony on February 6th, and of those eight million, six million came from the WILPF campaigns.
However, the women looked on in exasperation as the male diplomats presented their competing proposals, many of which demanded a rearmament prior to any disarmament. As the Conference ground to a halt and many countries moved to build up armaments and more secret treaties, the WILPF women examined what was happening. Dorothy Detzer looked beyond public opinion as expressed in the signatures and lobbied for an investigation into the power and influence of the arms manufacturers. In 1934, the Nye Committee in USA found that the munitions industry had made efforts to influence the congressional vote for war in 1917 but proposed legislation to curb the sale of arms was not implemented.

However with this WILPF work, the connection between war and industry became public knowledge. This ‘military-industrial complex’ still requires monitoring today and the work begun in 1932 is reflected in current WILPF campaigns to challenge militarism in all its forms, such as its Disarmament Programme, Reaching Critical Will.

Bibliography

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