Lucy Burns

Born July 28, 1879, Brooklyn NY

Died December 22, 1966, Brooklyn NY

Burns was the 4th of 8 children. Her father, a banker, believed in education for women. Lucy graduated from Vassar in 1902 and then studied linguistics at Yale, taught English for a few years at Erasmus Hall and then went to Europe for further graduate studies. She spent time at Berlin, Bonn and Oxford, but left her studies when she met the leaders of the Women’s Social and Political Union in 1909, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. She soon travelled to Scotland to organize woman’s suffrage activities, including rallies and marches. She quickly demonstrated her organizational skills and her fiery oratory as the leader of suffrage efforts in Edinburgh, strengths that many other suffragists would praise later in America. She also joined protests in London, and she was arrested, jailed and went on hunger strikes before leaving for the United States in 1910.

After one of her arrests in London she met Alice Paul at the police station where they were both in custody. They soon formed a formidable team with Burns organizing and leading demonstrations that would become increasingly radical in the United States. Back in America she teamed first with Harriet Stanton Blatch to organize a woman’s suffrage parade in 1912 that saw 3,000 women march down 5th Avenue in New York City.

Alice Paul returned to America in 1912, and with Burns, decided to adopt new tactics in the effort to achieve suffrage. The women would pressure the party in power, the Democrats, in order to get the suffrage amendment approved. Following the example of the suffragettes in England, they pushed to hold a parade in March 1913 to confront Woodrow Wilson when he arrived in D.C. for his inauguration. Although many of the more conservative members of NAWSA opposed the parade, Burns and Paul won their argument in the end. The parade featuring 8,000 women was marred by attacks from male onlookers and Army units were called in to defend the women when the D.C. police did nothing.

A few months after the parade Lucy Burns became the first of the suffragists to be arrested in D.C. when she chalked the sidewalk in front of the White House calling for Votes for Women. Labelled the 1st militant by the local papers, she had to appear in court. The judge let her off with a $1 fine, when traditionally the offense would lead to a $200 fine. For her effort, Burns was scolded by Dr. Anna Howard Shaw the president of NAWSA, who reminded her that this was not England.

Burns also worked in 1916 to organize a suffrage train that travelled to the western states where women already had suffrage, to urge them to vote against the Democrats.
After Wilson’s cold reaction to Inez Milholland’s death in late 1916, Burns, Paul, Blatch and others decided it was time to become militant. They would do something unprecedented, picket the White House. From the beginning of this effort, Burns organized the women pickets and made sure they were well equipped with their soon infamous banners. She was one of the 1st pickets arrested after she and Katharine Morey displayed the controversial Russia Banner in June 1917. She would be arrested 5 additional times in 1917. During the so-called Suffrage Riots in August 1917 when mobs tore away and destroyed many of the women’s banners, especially the infamous Kaiser Wilson banners, Burns made sure that there were more banners created in Cameron House and fresh pickets sent out when some were arrested. Attempting to display some of the banners from the 3rd floor Cameron House balcony she was nearly dragged off the balcony by angry male protesters while the police looked on.

In November 1917 she also led the suffragists imprisoned at Occoquan Workhouse when they declared themselves to be political prisoners. During the Night of Terror she tried to make sure all of the women dragged to the men’s prison were okay, despite the fact she was handcuffed to a cell door with nothing on but a blanket. She then led 16 women in a hunger strike. The prison authorities decided to force feed Burns and Dora Lewis, claiming they were trying to keep them alive. Visited by Matthew O’Brien, their attorney, Burns was able to get information out to Cameron House, and O’Brien got a writ of habeus corpus from a Federal Judge in Alexandria. Appalled by their condition, the judge released them all on November 27 and 28.

Burns also organized the protest at Lafayette Square (1918) and the watchfires in front of the White House 1919.

When the 19th Amendment was ratified in August 1920, Burns was exhausted. She retired from public life, returning to her family in Brooklyn. She lived with her 2 unmarried sisters. They help raise an orphaned niece. Burns also devoted much of her later years to work with the Catholic Church.