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EMMA MILLER AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN QUEENSLAND, 1894-1905

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The Federation movement coincided with the energetic campaign for women's suffrage in Australia. The 1890s also saw the development of the Australian Labor Party and the growth of trade unions. Although these organisations focused on improving wages, working conditions and electoral reform, their agendas did not include women and their particular needs. It was the push for one woman—one vote and one vote only that created divisions at the inaugural suffrage meeting in Queensland, and led to the formation of the working-class orientated Woman's Equal Franchise Association (WEFA), led by Emma Miller, and the more middle-class Woman's Franchise League. Emma Miller, a unionist with a rebel background, remained president of the WEFA from 1894 to 1905 when white women won the right to vote in Queensland state elections. Suffragists faced false promises and ridicule from politicians unable to logically argue against the franchise. With women casting their first federal vote in 1903, further divisions developed with the formation of two opposing women's political parties, the Labor-orientated Women Workers' Political Organisation and, to capture the conservative vote, the Queensland Women's Electoral League. □ *Women's suffrage, electoral reform, trade unions, women workers, Emma Miller, Leontine Cooper, Woman's Equal Franchise Association.*

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The Federation movement coincided with the energetic, passionate campaign for women's suffrage in Australia. In the late nineteenth century, gender roles were defined by well-accepted social attitudes and conventions: for men (falsely seen as the only breadwinners), out in the community deciding the future of the world; for women, within the narrow confines of the home. Women were considered unfit to cast an intelligent vote or accused of creating disharmony in the home if allowed to exercise it. Many women became increasingly angry at their second-class status, particularly as the lack of a vote in all parts of Australia, except in South Australia and Western Australia, denied them a say on such important issues as Federation. The struggle for women's suffrage in Australia has been underplayed because Australian women won the vote well before their sisters elsewhere. Women in South Australia achieved this goal in 1894, only a year after New Zealand's women became the first in the world to vote in national elections. Nevertheless, the campaign for women's suffrage in Australia was vigorous and sustained, and continued until 1908 when Victoria finally granted its women the right to vote in state elections.

The 1890s also coincided with the birth of the Australian Labor Party and the growth of trade

unions. Although these organisations focused on improving wages, working conditions and electoral reform, their agendas did not include women and their particular needs. Women workers were denied union membership and those entering male trades on low wages were accused of causing unemployment.

EMMA MILLER

The campaign for women's suffrage in Queensland was led by a woman of extraordinary courage and conviction, Emma Miller (Fig. 1), friend and organiser of women workers and an active supporter of the trade union movement. Emma was president of the Woman's Equal Franchise Association for the eleven years of its existence, from 1894 to 1905 when white women in Queensland won the right to vote in state elections. She was a remarkable figure in an era when women seldom entered public life.

Emma Miller was born in 1839 in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, England, the daughter of Martha (nee Hollingworth) and Daniel Holmes. Emma's father, a bootmaker, was a Chartist, and she marched with him as a child and inherited his spirit of rebellion against injustices. She always wore the title of rebel with pride and lived her life by the Chartist creed, from the writings of Thomas Paine: 'The World is my country: to do good is my religion'.¹ Emma married Jabez



FIG. 1 Emma Miller, 'the grand old woman of Queensland'. (John Oxley Library, Brisbane, neg. no. 86511)

Silcock in 1857 and had four children before Jabez' death from tuberculosis in 1870. In 1874 she married William Calderwood, with whom she and her children migrated to Australia, arriving in Brisbane in March 1879. Tuberculosis, sadly, also claimed William's life the following year. Six years later she married Andrew Miller, who died in 1897.

Soon after arriving in Brisbane, Emma Miller concerned herself with the lot of working people. She was disappointed to find some of the evils of inequality and oppression that she had left behind in Europe, for at the time Queensland had no factory legislation, no compensation laws, no sick pay, no old age or unemployment pensions, and no votes for women. She was aware of the shocking conditions endured by many of Brisbane's workers: the unhealthy workshops; the stifling atmosphere inside gas-lit stores; the starvation wages paid irregularly, if at all, to outworkers; and the long, weary hours for all, particularly for domestic servants ('slaveys') who could be called upon at any hour of the day. At the Royal Commission into Shops, Factories and Workshops in 1891, Emma gave evidence exposing the exploitation of pieceworkers. She gave her trade as a 'gentleman's white shirt maker' who had learnt all aspects of the trade in Manchester. When widowed, she had supported her family by 'the needle', working long hours from home, measuring, cutting out and sewing.² Some of her fellows optimistically clung to the hope of a better life, but Emma's experience from childhood was that workers had to organise and agitate to improve their conditions, not just hope. She helped in forming trade unions

and, in 1890, assisted organiser May Jordan (later McConnel) found a Women's Union. Emma also assisted Frank McDonnell in the Early Closing Movement, which won its demands on 1 January 1901, Federation Day. She fought against the prevailing antagonistic attitude that denied women workers membership of unions, insisting

that women were as important to the unions as the unions were to them.

As well as strong trade unions, Emma Miller envisaged a workers' political party, equal pay and votes for women as being vital to improving the lot of working people. An active supporter of the 1891 Shearers' Strike, she joined the crowds who marched through Brisbane streets with the released strike leaders, remembering this as the happiest day of her life.³ Although her friend William Lane had played a positive role during the strike, through his newspaper the *Worker*, she disapproved of his opting out of the struggle in 1893 by forming the Utopian socialist settlement in Paraguay. Emma, a foundation member of the Australian Labor Party, was a staunch adherent of bedrock labour principle, expecting the same of others and often harshly berating those who wavered.⁴ Proud of her title of respect, 'Mother Miller' (Mother of the Labor Party), she was a willing propagandist, much in demand although not regarded as an orator. Her appeal was the sincerity, energy and intensity of purpose which emanated from her small and seemingly fragile frame. She urged her fellow activists not to be afraid of hard work or unpopularity for, where conscience was satisfied, unpopularity should not matter; respectability meant acting in humanity's interest.

Despite her busy life, Emma Miller found time to relax. She revelled in the excitement of auction sales and was said to be a woman of literary and artistic taste whose great love was the theatre.⁵ Age did not appear to weary her! In 1912, at the age of seventy-three, she championed the Tramways Strike in Brisbane, achieving renown for thrusting her hatpin into Police Commissioner Cahill's horse. This was on 'Black Friday' when, after leading a group of women to Parliament House, she was attacked by baton-wielding police. The horse threw Cahill, leaving him with a permanent limp. Later, Emma actively opposed World War I and conscription and became widely known as 'the grand old woman of Queensland'.

As the Chartists' platform centred around universal suffrage, it was only to be expected that Emma Miller would become a leader of Queensland's suffrage movement. After early attempts to organise in 1889, the movement received impetus in 1894 when an inaugural meeting was held in Brisbane. This led to division over the objectives of the proposed organisation, the main leader of the opposition

being Leontine Cooper, a schoolteacher-cum-journalist with a middle-class background.

LEONTINE COOPER

Leontine Cooper (born Buisson) was the daughter of a French merchant and an English woman. Born in 1837, she migrated to Australia in 1871 with her husband, Edward Cooper, and in 1874 became the first schoolteacher at Chinaman's Creek (now Albany Creek) school.⁶ A tiny park, adjacent to the Albany Creek school, bears her name. A cultured, well educated woman of strong opinions, she wrote short stories and articles for another of William Lane's newspapers, the *Boomerang*. Her articles also appeared in the *Queenslander*, the *Worker* and in Louisa Lawson's journal, the *Dawn*. At one stage, Leontine edited her own journal, the *Star*, as a vehicle for suffrage and temperance material and the writings of noted Australian and international women.⁷ She also wrote articles for the short-lived *Early Closing Advocate*, the Early Closing Movement's paper. Leontine did not agree always with Labor Party policy and did not see eye to eye with William Lane, but she had a humane concern for working women and their lack of support from male workers. She considered herself a radical and, like Emma Miller, advocated equal pay. In a *Boomerang* article Leontine queried why women should be prevented from entering the labour market on the same footing as men, suggesting that workers should regard themselves as one class regardless of divisions of gender.⁸

Leontine Cooper was one of six women appointed to the 1891 Royal Commission into Shops, Factories and Workshops, bringing a feminist viewpoint to the proceedings. In the *Boomerang*, she attacked a system which did not protect women from violence, excluded them from higher education and gave them no say in the laws under which they lived.⁹ She pointed out that the male-dominant order would always frame laws to protect its own interests, and hence it was essential for women to have the vote.¹⁰ With Emma Miller, she saw suffrage as particularly important to women workers. In 1903, responding to women who had opposed the abolition of 'kanaka traffic', Leontine commented that women were 'as sharply divided in political opinions as men'. She believed that Labor women were better informed on political matters that concerned them than society women, for whom an interest in politics was neither 'womanly', nor 'nice'.¹¹ Also a petite woman, she

was described as having 'a slow, graceful manner' and a 'gentle, low and refined voice'.¹²

WOMEN'S FRANCHISE MOVEMENT BEGINS

The newly-formed Labor Party turned its attention to the inequities of the electoral system, while William Lane used his newspaper, the *Worker*, to agitate against the residency restriction which disenfranchised many itinerant workers. As the main bone of contention was the plural vote, more blatantly abused in Queensland than in any other colony, one man-one vote became the focus of the campaign for electoral reform. In 1891, at the Intercolonial Trade Union Congress, an attempt was made to include the franchise for women to a plank calling for the extension of one adult-one vote to all male adults, by simply deleting 'male' from the wording. This was defeated on the pretext that, although there was acceptance of women's suffrage, the time was not opportune. (It was not until 1898 that the Labor Party adopted universal adult suffrage into its official platform.) With new hope and inspiration from the victories of women in New Zealand in 1893 and South Australia the following year, Labor women decided to ignore the male congress decision and began organising.

In 1891, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), frustrated by its inability to influence the passage of legislation such as the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* and the *Contagious Diseases' Act*, established a Suffrage Department. This Department created little interest until 1893 when Eleanor Trundle became superintendent. The WCTU saw the vote as a means of achieving their temperance objective and was well represented at a public meeting in Brisbane called on 28 February 1894 with the idea of forming a suffrage organisation. The chairman of the meeting, Hon. W. Taylor MLC, was supported on the platform by Sir Charles Lilley, Lady Lilley, Alderman J. Clark, Leontine Cooper, Emma Miller, Dr W. Little, Eleanor Trundle, Mr Harris and Mrs Moginie, the latter a Quaker and former member of the New South Wales Suffrage League.

Leontine Cooper, after addressing the meeting, moved a resolution:

That this meeting of Brisbane citizens is of the opinion that the time has come when the electoral laws of the Colony should be so altered as to extend to women the privilege of a political vote.¹³

In seconding the resolution, Sir Charles Lilley, a retired Supreme Court judge, stressed the importance of the vote to sweated working

women. Sarah Bailey, commissioner at the 1891 Royal Commission and a Women's Union member, moved an amendment (previously distributed to the audience) that the words 'to extend to all women the right to one vote each and one vote only in parliamentary and municipal elections' be inserted after the word 'altered'.¹⁴ There was confusion! Sarah Bailey was urged to withdraw the amendment as it would cause dissension in the new organisation, but Emma Miller suggested that the matter might be settled amicably by a show of hands. This was done and the amendment was carried, although not all voted. It was also agreed that an organisation be formed, the Woman's Franchise Association, and many joined before the meeting closed.

On 5 March 1894 another meeting was held to help settle divisions in the association and to clarify its objectives. As it was felt that the Labor men at the earlier meeting had tended to dominate, males were requested to retire. It was agreed that the organisation be named the Woman's Equal Franchise Association (WEFA). The addition of the word 'equal' was explained by Emma Miller's daughter, Kate Macfie: 'It means that everyone shall stand on an equal footing on polling day; that there shall be no property votes'.¹⁵ The next motion was: 'That the object of this Association is to obtain the franchise for women on the same conditions as those which apply to men'. An amendment changed the motion to: 'That the object of this Association shall be to secure to every adult woman the right of franchise'.¹⁶ Emma Miller moved a further amendment to change the last words 'to secure one woman-one vote' and explained that:

She hoped society would endeavour to lift women out of the mire and to make every woman know that she was entitled only to one vote. Otherwise any man who had a block of land could divide it between his sisters and daughters and so get four or five votes additional (Applause). They did not ask for anything unfair. All women were equal; they wanted One Woman, One Vote and not three or four apiece for some women.¹⁷

Leontine Cooper disagreed because she thought if they asked for something they were unlikely to get, their aims would be retarded. She queried whether working men were prepared to do justice to their women comrades, for few expressed a favourable attitude to the principle. Kate Macfie responded by asking why women should withdraw because men did not have one man-one vote: 'let women stand to their guns and fight for it until they got it'.¹⁸



"Here, you man! Where's that Vote you promised Me?"

FIG. 2. Emma Miller pays her respects to Premier Robert Philp. (*The Worker*, 17 November 1900)

A few days later, Leontine Cooper, previously elected vice-president, resigned from the WEFA. She wrote to the *Worker*:

If we desire a speedy recognition of the claim of women to political representation I think it unwise to clog the movement with the huge political revolution which one man one vote subtends. I consider the latter the Labour Party's battle and I think they are quite strong enough to fight it without clinging to our petticoats for help.¹⁹

Leontine soon gathered around her a group of women who on 17 April 1894 formed the breakaway Woman's Franchise League (WFL) with the policy 'to secure Parliamentary franchise for women on the same conditions as it is or may be granted to men'.²⁰ The WFL officials were Leontine Cooper, president, Mrs C. Preston, secretary, and Mrs Butterly, treasurer. In a letter to the daily papers, Leontine Cooper, as president, expressed respect for the straightforwardness of Labor women, as opposed to that of Labor men,

and accused the WEFA of having Labor Party links. This Emma Miller strenuously denied in a response to the press.²¹ Unfortunately, little information survives of WFL activities, other than a *Telegraph* report of an early deputation to Premier H.M. Nelson. Brisbane's daily newspapers did not report later suffrage meetings. WCTU, with a policy similar to WFL's, reported a surge of interest in the suffrage cause in the large coastal towns and Brisbane suburbs.²² The main focus of the three groups was the Franchise Bills being presented to Parliament.

The WEFA produced a petition which was also printed as a coupon in the *Worker*, one for women to sign and another for men. Emma Miller had been elected president, Catherine Hughes (who had recently retired as secretary of the YWCA), secretary and Mrs Fairman, treasurer. Despite early differences, the three organisations, sometimes combined in deputations and in forming suburban and country groups. They all campaigned by holding public meetings, lobbying politicians and distributing leaflets, petitions and myriad letters. There were many changes of Premiers during

the campaign and many disappointments when legislation was promised and then denied. The winning of the vote by Western Australian women in 1899 gave new heart to the suffragists who continued to agitate on the grounds of justice, women's right to share in government and the advantages of this to the new nation. As issues that vitally concerned them and in which they had no say, they cited the *Women's Property Act* of 1891-97 and the Federation referendum.

Ridicule and facetious insults were the only defences the women's opposition could produce. During the Federation referendum campaign, Queensland Premier Dickson promised to introduce one man-one vote in return for a Yes vote, but then incensed women by suggesting that, if they had the vote, they would treat it as a plaything and reject it after using it once or twice.

This was followed by other chauvinistic remarks, such as:

only the plain and the ugly want the vote; politics and parliament are only fit for men, there will be disharmony in the home; it will disrupt society, make women unwomanly; it will be a cruel day for Queensland when women are allowed to vote.

Mr Duffy MLA explained his opposition:

Women of education and refinement may be unwilling to meet rowdy men at the polls resulting in the unintelligent vote being largely predominant.²³

Insults only made the women more determined, more aware of their ability to finally win their objective. The Governor, in opening Parliament in 1900, foreshadowed the introduction of Premier Dickson's promised electoral legislation, but once again the suffragists were to be disappointed when the Dickson Ministry fell and Robert Philp became Premier.

The three leaders, Emma Miller, Leontine Cooper and Eleanor Trundle united in a deputation (Fig. 2) and, according to the *Worker*, they were promised a one adult-one vote Bill, but it was not until 1901 that the Bill appeared. As well as abolishing the property vote and enfranchising women, it gave two votes to every male elector who was the father of two children born in wedlock in Queensland. Derisively dubbed the 'baby vote', the Bill was believed by some to have been in response to Queensland's falling birth rate. It was ridiculed by politicians and local newspapers. Asked her opinion, Emma Miller replied, 'You cannot go and listen to a fool thing like that: there is no business meant in it'.²⁴ She stressed that women had been treated as babies for too long. There was so much opposition that the Bill was shelved. Perhaps that was the cynical purpose of it all along?

The women had more reason to be impressed, and overjoyed, when on 9 April 1902, the *Federal Electoral Act* enfranchised white women and made them eligible for election to Federal Parliament.²⁵ However, as Section 41 of the Australian Constitution stipulated that the Commonwealth could not deny a vote to anyone entitled to a state vote, South Australian Aborigines, who had received the vote when the women were enfranchised, became the only indigenous people with a federal vote.²⁶ There is no evidence to suggest that Queensland suffragists took up the Aboriginal cause. In fact, the WEFA's first petition called for a vote for 'white women' and, when queried about this, Kate Macfie explained that the organisation was 'very much against black labour'.²⁷ Subsequent petitions dropped the word 'white', although in

1896 the secretary commented, 'we are always prepared to accept the hand of all white women irrespective of wealth or standing'.²⁸

With a federal election due on 16 December 1903, the campaign took on a new dimension. The WEFA took leave for a few months and reformed itself as the Women Workers Political Organisation (WWPO) (Fig. 3). The Queensland Women's Electoral League (QWEL) was formed to capture the conservative vote for women. Its early manifesto did not reflect feminist issues, nor did it include the franchise for women in state elections. However, its secretary, Margaret Ogg was a member of the WCTU and an active suffragist. The QWEL acknowledged an

Women Workers' Political Organisation.

HEADQUARTERS:

Trades Hall, Brisbane.

OBJECTS:

- To secure the just political representation of women in the the Australian Federal and State Parliaments.
- To promote and safeguard the interests of women in the body politic.
- To advance the political representation of women by meetings, lectures, visitations, the distribution of literature, and all other available legitimate means.

PLATFORM:

1. Maintenance of a White Australia.
2. Compulsory Arbitration.
3. Old Age Pensions.
4. Nationalisation of Monopolies, including the drink traffic.
5. Equal Marriage and Divorce Laws.
6. Equal Parental Rights over Children.
7. Equal Pay for Equal Work.
8. Minimum Wage.
9. Restriction of Public Borrowing.
10. International Arbitration.

Terms of Membership, One Shilling a Year.

Women in sympathy with the above Organisation are invited to communicate with the Hon. Secretary, c/o Trades Hall, Brisbane.

"Worker" Typ., Brisbane.

FIG. 3. Women Workers' Political Organisation campaign leaflet. (Courtesy of Pam Young)

anti-Labor bias. Emma Miller was elected president and Lizzie Alder, secretary of the WWPO. After campaigning in Ipswich and Toowoomba, Emma, now 65, was so rejuvenated by the applause she received that she announced, 'I am only beginning to live'. She revelled in electioneering and often assisted Labor candidates in their campaigns.²⁹ The WWPO trained women in voting procedures by organising mock elections, as did the other groups. After the election, a *Worker* letter paid tribute to the Labor women:

Then the women who took the platform and stump! – gallant little Mrs Miller, instinct with a natural eloquence springing straight from a heart that has never lost the fervidness of youth. And Mrs Alder – cool, incisive argumentative: Mrs Johnson, earnest and convincing.³⁰

THE CHALLENGE CONTINUES

Women in New South Wales won the right to vote in state elections in 1902, followed by their sisters in Tasmania in the following year, but women in Queensland and Victoria still did not have this right. The fight had to continue, though victory seemed closer. Suffragists had learned much about campaigning, training speakers and marshalling their ideas and arguments. They still concerned themselves with other issues, such as the sweated conditions of working women and the right to march on Labor Day, and were still greeted with derision. In 1903 the Labor party, with William Kidston as leader, entered into coalition with Sir Arthur Morgan's Liberals, and in late 1904, an Electoral Franchise Bill was introduced. Although passed by the Legislative Assembly, it was opposed in the Upper House. A citizens' indignation meeting was called in protest, featuring Emma Miller and Lizzie Alder as the main speakers. When an amended Bill was introduced at a special session in January 1905, it was debated for three weeks. But times had changed – Australian women had registered their first federal vote and they were involved in political parties. Advantages could now be seen in granting women the vote. The Elections Act Amendment Bill passed both Houses on 25 January 1905, enfranchising white Queensland women and abolishing the plural vote.³¹

The *Worker* paid tribute to Emma Miller:

If anyone in Queensland deserves special recognition by the women of this State, in this hour of triumph, it is Emma Miller, President of the W.E.F.A.; the grand Old Lady who has for years been their trusted and tireless leader in the battle for the franchise ... In doing honour to her the women of Queensland would do honour to themselves.³²

The WEFA presented Emma with an illuminated address, one of many she received during her lifetime. Suffragists were sad that Leontine Cooper did not live to cast her vote in a federal election or to see the winning of the Queensland state vote for which she had so passionately fought. She died suddenly on 12 March 1903 of bronchial pneumonia, and was mourned by suffragists as their ablest writer. The *Worker* paid tribute to her:

Mrs Cooper wanted the vote at any price and she did not see eye to eye with Labour women, but she kept the suffrage flag flying by the spoken and written word for many years.³³

In 1906, with the first state election involving women due the following year, Emma Miller travelled to western Queensland to campaign and form WWPO branches. She died of cancer on 22 January 1917, two days after making her last speech to the Toowoomba Anti-conscription League. Wonderful tributes and red wreaths arrived from throughout Australia. Brisbane's Trades Hall flag flew at half mast. A publicly-funded marble portrait bust of her, sculpted by James Laurence Watts, was unveiled at the Trades Hall in 1922, a worthy memorial to 'the grand old woman of Queensland'.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*. The original wording is: 'My country is the world; my religion is to do good'.
2. Report of the Royal Commission into Shops, Factories and Workshops, 1891, pp. 205-7.
3. *The Worker*, 20 November 1893.
4. Information from Margaret (Peg) Peters, Emma Miller's granddaughter.
5. *Ibid*; *Truth* tribute, 28 January 1917.
6. D. R. Teague, *The History of Albany Creek, Bridgeman Downs and Eatons Hill* (Brisbane: Colonial Press, 1972), p. 35. Leontine Cooper later taught French at the Brisbane Girls' Grammar School.
7. Unfortunately, no copies of the *Star* have survived.
8. *Dawn*, 1 May 1891.
9. *Boomerang*, 8 December 1888.
10. *Brisbane Courier*, 4 March 1903.
11. *Brisbane Courier*, 4 March 1903.
12. Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia, A Gift or a Struggle* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 114; *Woman's Sphere*, October 1904.
13. *Telegraph*, 1 March 1894.
14. *Telegraph*, 1 March 1894.
15. *Telegraph*, 6 March 1894.
16. In moving the amendment, Mrs Moginie explained that the purpose was to include all women, both working women and gentlewomen. 'Suffragette'

- was coined in 1905 by the *London Daily Mail* to trivialise the English campaign. It was not used in the Australian campaign.
17. *Telegraph*, 6 March 1894.
 18. *Telegraph*, 6 March 1894.
 19. *The Worker*, 7 March 1894.
 20. *Telegraph*, 20 April 1894.
 21. *Brisbane Courier*, 30 April 1894.
 22. Of these organisations, only the WCTU has left written records, with the exception of three pages of WEFA reports, handwritten by Catherine Hughes, now in the John Oxley Library, Brisbane.
 23. *Telegraph*, 29 June 1894.
 24. *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 88 (1901), p. 1815.
 25. Voting became compulsory in federal elections in 1924.
 26. By 1908, all states except Queensland and Western Australia enfranchised adult Aborigines, although few may have enrolled. In these two states, Aborigines could not vote in federal elections until 1962 and 1965 in Queensland State elections.
 27. *The Worker*, 28 April 1894.
 28. *The Worker*, 4 April 1896.
 29. *The Worker*, 12 September 1903.
 30. *The Worker*, 19 December 1903.
 31. From 1915 Queensland women could stand for State Parliament.
 32. *The Worker*, 4 February 1905. Recently, an illuminated address to Premier Morgan, signed by Emma Miller (WEFA) and Lizzie Alder (WWPO), was discovered in a Brisbane antique shop and acquired by a private collector. The address thanks the Premier for granting Queensland women the vote.
 33. *The Worker*, 4 February 1905.