

Part 3: Women Workers' Organisations



1881 Matchgirls Strike at Bryant and May's

3.1 Introduction

Women have played an active role in the British trade union movement since its inception. The first known strike for equal pay was organised by 1,500 women card-setters in Peeps Green, Yorkshire in 1832. However, they were often met with fierce resistance both from employers and by the established trade unions.

Women workers' early attempts to take collective action against their employers were perceived as a serious threat to social cohesion. A commentator on a female mill workers' strike in 1835 wrote that female militancy was 'more menacing to established institutions even than the education of the lower orders.' Once they ventured beyond work such as spinning and weaving – considered extensions of 'womanly duties' – into the factories, women workers were considered a real threat to societal order and moral values. The trade union movement led mainly by men in skilled occupations who had developed a conservative and complacent attitude were often resistant to women being in the workplace at all, either due to the view that they ought to be at home child rearing or, if they were in work, then they were liable to reduce the wages and conditions of the men. In a speech to the Trades Union Congress in 1875, the TUC's parliamentary secretary Henry Broadhurst urged Congress to 'bring about a condition where (our) wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world.'

The introduction of capitalism in Britain from the late 18th century onwards continued to reflect the patriarchal nature of society that had been present in all previous class-based societies, thereby relegating women subordinate to men. But, capitalism also contained the germs of a challenge to that long sustained economic, legal and cultural division because capitalism was ultimately more concerned about profit than any cultural distinctions between sexes. In other words everyone was ripe for exploitation, women included. Indeed women

because of their status could be exploited even more than men. Thus women were drawn into the labour market and the world of work outside the domestic sphere in a way that no previous class society had achieved or envisaged. Sexual divisions of labour were clearly in operation as men with their heavier bulk and muscle clearly had an advantage in many heavy industry settings and this continues to be the case. In addition, a clear differential emerged of the rate of exploitation between men and women, where women were paid far less than men, even for similar types of work. This remained an area of struggle in the period under consideration and remains one today. Furthermore conditions for women in the workplace were often far inferior and this too became a zone of struggle.

Although women worked in all manner of trades and industries the largest single occupation by far was in domestic service, where, generally in this period, over 1.6 million women were employed. The various textile trades employed the next largest group, mainly in Lancashire and Yorkshire. Fisheries employed significant numbers of women at fishing ports, where they gutted and packed fish and the mines also continued to employ women but after the 1842 Mines Act not underground.



*'Colliery Amazons and Venuses'.
Pit brow lasses.*



CARDBOARD-BOX MAKING.



Sweated Labour at home

There was also a considerable amount of home working by women which involved sweated labour, whereby in order to earn even a small amount long hours were required of tedious repetitive work.

This piecework often involved child labour as well. The type of work varied enormously and could involve finishing work on garments and shoes, or sewing items onto finished articles, assembling cardboard boxes and so on.

3.2 Trade Union Organisations for women

Although the number of women in trade unions had increased by 1914, the fact remained that 90% of all trade unionists were men and over 90% of women workers remained unorganised. Of the 10% of organised women, almost half were members of unions in the textile industry (the only industry in which they had maintained continuous organisation), and a high proportion of the remainder were members of teaching, clerical and shop workers unions.

Although the periods of growth in women's trade union membership usually coincided with overall union expansion, the unions themselves can rarely claim the credit for organising women workers. The early period of capitalism up until the 1880s saw very little progress for the organisation of women workers. The most development was in Lancashire. In 1859 the North East Lancashire Amalgamated Society was formed for both men and women and in 1884 the Northern Counties Amalgamated Association of Weavers was established for male and female workers. Even in these organisations women played only subsidiary roles on the whole, usually at lower subscriptions and with less benefits. On the other side of the Pennines women weavers created a strong fighting organisation, *The Dewsbury, Batley and Surrounding District Heavy Woollen Weavers Association*.



On 13 February 1875, 9000 female and male striking weavers converged in a field near Spinkwell Mills, Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. They were on strike against the imposition of a 10% wage cut. The main speaker at Dewsbury was a woman, **Ann Ellis**. In fact this strike was organised by an all-female committee. This was unusual but showed that under certain conditions not only could men and women collaborate in industrial disputes but that women could lead such actions with the support of men. This strike was successful.



Strike Committee of the Dewsbury and Batley Woollen Weavers

The strike by women match workers at the Bryant and May factory in Bow in 1888, a decade later (dealt with in an earlier section) is recognised as a vital catalyst for the 'new unionism' of the 1880s and as paving the way for the 1889 Gasworkers' and Dockers' strikes which laid the foundations of the modern Trade Union movement.

3.2.1 Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL),

Organising women workers into trade unions was a challenging task. One of the first organisations that set out to do just that was the **Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL)**, which was founded in 1874 by **Emma Paterson**. The purpose of the WPPL was not to be a trade union itself but to foster the development of women's trade unions. The League fostered the growth of separate associations of women working in such trades as dressmaking, millinery and upholstery. Between 1874 and 1886 over thirty such unions were formed on the same plan, using a model constitution devised by the League. Most of these Societies were very small, weak and short lived. They hardly merit the description 'trade union' since their stated aim was to 'to promote an entente cordiale between the labourer, the employer and the consumer.' Strike action was deprecated as 'rash and mistaken' and instead emphasis was placed on friendly society benefits. Three societies that had some substance were, *The Society of Women Bookbinders*, *the Society of Women Upholsterers* and *the Society of Shirt and Collar Makers*. A more generic union, *The National Union of Working Women* was also separately established in Bristol.

Apart from their class collaborationist approach the League was opposed to protective legislation for women on the grounds that it restricted women's choice of employment and her earning capacity. One of the lasting achievements of the League was to get the first women delegates to the annual TUC, among whom was Emma Paterson herself. However, even the League's position on the question of equal pay was not very robust. As they put it in 1884: *'We have always declared against attempts to introduce women into trades at rates of wages far below those previously paid to men for similar work. We have therefore never joined in, or expressed approval of, the abuse heaped by certain middle class papers and economists on workmen who have struck against unfair competition of this kind.'* Nonetheless, an exception to this general rule was made in the case of the Kidderminster Carpet Weavers strike of 1884 in which the male carpet weavers withdrew their labour in protest against the use of women who were taken on to

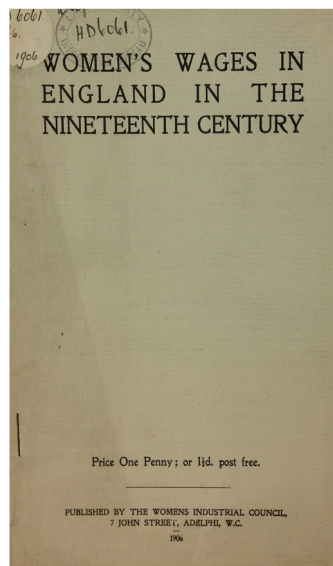
weave velvet; a new product in the town. The WPPL thought that in this case, and in contrast to their usual policy, the men should be condemned because the women were not doing similar work and were therefore not offering any competition.

Emma Patterson died aged 38 in 1886. **Clementina Black** took over as Secretary for three years and after that it was led by **Emilia Dilke**.

3.2.3 Women's Trade Union Association and Women's Industrial Council

In 1889 Clementina Black helped form the more radical Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA). The WTUA had quite a close relationship with the SDF. Clementina Black and Eleanor Marx worked closely on the WTUA, travelling the country making speeches trying to persuade women to join trade unions and to campaign for "equal pay for equal work". In 1894 Black and others formed a new organisation, the **Women's Industrial Council (WIC)** and the WTUA was merged into it.

The WIC concentrated on researching and campaigning on issues relating to the conditions under which women worked, seeking to get reforms. As such it attracted a wide range of women, especially from the middle class and from those who were also attracted to the Fabians. In particular the WIC investigated conditions in particular trades and wrote extensive reports. By 1913 117 trades had been investigated. The Council's results were published in books and in its quarterly publication, *Women's Industrial News*.



Apart from this investigative work the WIC also sought to widen the range of employment available to women and girls through training and education and promoted girls' clubs. It supported the work of factory inspectors and monitored breaches of the *Factory Acts*. Although the focus of its work was London, there were branches in the provinces, for example in Liverpool.

Clementina Black, **Amie Hicks**, and **Clara James**, who had already gained experience in all of these activities in the WTUA, continued to work together in the WIC, where they were joined by a new recruit, **Margaret Gladstone/MacDonald**, the daughter of a professor of chemistry who had an interest in social questions and married the future Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald.

3.2.4 Women's Trade Union League

In 1903 the WTUA changed its name to the **Women's Trade Union League (WTUL)**. **Mary Macarthur** became Secretary and other important figures in the union included **Margaret Bondfield**, **Dorothy Jewson** and **Susan Lawrence**.

The League supported strikes and encouraged women to join existing trade unions.



Mary Macarthur addressing a strike meeting

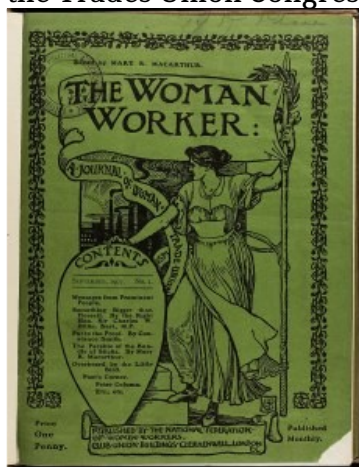
It reversed the WPPL policy of opposing protective legislation for women and instead campaigned for its extension. The League became an unofficial Women's TUC and was dissolved in 1921 when the TUC agreed to take on its functions by forming the **Women Workers' Group**.

3.2.5 National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW)



The National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) was a trade union active in the first part of the 20th century. Instrumental in winning women workers the right to a minimum wage for the first time, the NFWW broke down barriers for women's membership in trade unions in general. In contrast to the numerous small craft unions which organised women workers in the late 19th century, the NFWW was established in 1906 as a general trade union open to all women across a range of industries where women's work predominated, where wages were low and where trade unionism had to that time been unsuccessful. **Mary Macarthur** played a key role throughout the NFWW's existence, leading campaigns against sweated industries, mobilising public support for striking members, lobbying for legislative reform and engaging with the broader labour movement.

The NFWW was established out of frustration that existing trade unions were not open to female members. When first established, the NFWW was met with resistance from others within the trade union movement. The male-dominated unions regularly opposed the idea of "organised women" who would damage the status of trade unionism by the nature of having women who could not vote be part of the political movement. The earlier established Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) promoted union membership to women, however the WTUL was not itself a trade union and acted instead as an umbrella group for women who were members of other existing unions. The unsuccessful dispute in 1906 of women workers in the Dundee Jute industry highlighted the need for a coordinated union. The Dundee dispute failed due to the inability of the WTUL to raise £100 required for a strike fund to support the strikers. Those involved in the federation supported opening existing unions, however, at the time the Trades Union Congress did not allow mixed-sex unions affiliation and



therefore an all-female union was needed. The NFWW is recognised as having a major influence in influencing the Liberal Party to introduce the Trade Boards Act 1909 which set minimum wages for industries that had a high proportion of female workers.

By the end of 1906 the NFWW had seventeen branches and 2,000 members, this grew to an estimated peak of around 40,000 in 1914. It published a paper called *The Woman Worker*.

3.3 Women and the TUC

In some cases the unions founded by women affiliated to the TUC and in 1875 the first women delegates attended the Annual Conference, representing two of these new unions. These pioneer women were **Edith Simcox** of the *Shirt and Collar Makers Union* and **Emma Patterson**, representing the *Bookbinders Union*. They were both middle class organisers, who had the wherewithal to attend. Edith became the first ever woman to address the TUC, and Emma the second both, on Factory Inspection. Despite a resolution passed urging the TUC to press for women Factory Inspectors, the leadership, under Henry Broadhurst, did nothing. But once he was deposed in 1891 progress was made in this area.

Some of Emma Patterson's views expressed at the TUC were controversial. She opposed new legislation that she believed would only worsen the working conditions of factory women and reduce their wages. But her tact and perseverance helped her soften some of the prejudice male delegates had against female activists. The secretary of the WPPL in the 1880s, **Clementina Black**, moved the first successful equal pay resolution at the 1888 Trades Union Congress (TUC).

Women's participation in the TUC tailed off in 1890s. There were a number of reasons but women were never accepted as full delegates and never accepted into the highest body, the Parliamentary Committee. They were also excluded from all delegations sent to Government. In 1899 there was only one female delegate and that was **Margaret Bondfield**. She was just 24 and Assistant Secretary of the *National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks*.



She made a powerful speech to the 1889 TUC Congress, which was highly appreciated. The union represented dressmakers, upholsterers, bookbinders, artificial-flower makers, feather dressers, tobacco, jam and pickle workers, shop assistants and typists.

3.3.1 TUC and the Suffrage Issue

In 1884 a further extension of franchise extended the vote to many working men. This meant that most TUC delegates could now vote and the suffrage issue was shelved for some years. But in 1901 the TUC's Parliamentary Committee set up a sub-committee to consider the franchise issue again. It had 5 men and 1 woman — **Helen Silcock**, a cotton weaver from Wigan and a member of the SDF, a full time organiser for WTUL and a member of the *Lancashire and Cheshire Suffrage Society*. The resolution that followed called for the extension of the franchise to all adult men and women, on the principle of one adult one vote. It was passed without dissension. This was dubbed the “adultist approach”.

In 1902 and 1903 efforts were made to persuade TUC to support limited women's suffrage but to no avail. Margaret Bondfield the emerging female trade unionist of repute argued the adultist position in these debates.

3.3.2 Women's sections in Trade Unions

At the close of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century many trade unions formed women's sections, or as in the case of the *Railway Operatives Union*, an auxiliary for wives and daughters of railway workers. Among those trade unions with active women's sections were the Tailors and Garment

Workers, the Shop Assistants, the National Union of Textile Workers, the Boot and Shoe Operatives and the Printing and Paper Workers union.

3.4 Co-operative Women's Guild



Northumberland Women's Co-operative Guild

The Co-operative Women's Guild was an auxiliary organisation of the co-operative movement in the United Kingdom, which promoted women in co-operative structures and provided social and other services to its members.

The guild was founded in 1883 by **Alice Acland**, who edited the "Women's Corner" of the *Co-operative News*, and **Mary Lawrenson**, a teacher who suggested the creation of an organization to promote instructional and recreational classes for mothers and girls. Acland began organizing a **Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation**, which held its first formal meeting of 50 women at the 1883 Co-operative Congress in Edinburgh and established local branches. It began as an organization dedicated to spreading the co-operative movement, but soon expanded beyond the retail-based focus of the movement to organizing political campaigns on women's issues including health and suffrage. **Annie Williams**, a suffragette organiser for the Women's Social and Political Union in Newcastle found in 1910 that 'Co-operative women are very keen to know about 'Votes for Women'.

In 1884 the league changed its name to the **Women's Co-operative Guild** and later to the Co-operative Women's Guild. In 1899, **Margaret Llewelyn Davies** was elected general secretary of the Guild and was widely credited with greatly increasing the success of the Guild. By 1910 it had 32,000 members. Maternity benefits were included in the National Insurance Act 1911 because of the guild's pressure.

3.5 Selective Biographies

Emma Patterson was born Emma Smith in London in 1848. Her father was headmaster of a school. In 1867 she became assistant secretary of the *Working Men's Club and Institute Union*. In 1872 she became secretary to the *National Society of Women's Suffrage*. She married Thomas Patterson, a cabinet maker, in 1873 and resigned from the Suffrage society post.



From a long honeymoon in the USA, Emma was impressed by the example of the *Female Umbrella Makers Union* in New York and on her return to England set about replicating that idea.

In 1874 she established the *Women's Protective and Provident League* (see above). She addressed numerous public meetings all over the country.

She died in 1886.

A male union colleague said of her in 1913, "*she exercised an influence on the Labour movement which no other woman has equalled since her day, and its secret lay in her entire sincerity and absence of pose. She never cared for the limelight, and never thought herself great.*"



Clementina Black was a writer, feminist and pioneering trade unionist, closely connected to the Marxist SDF and the Fabian Society. She worked for women's rights at work and for women's suffrage.

She was born in 1853 into a middle class family in Brighton. The family moved to London in the 1880s where she became involved in socialist politics and became friendly with the [Marx](#) family, notably Eleanor Marx. She was involved over a long period with the problems of working-class women and the emerging trade union movement.

In 1886, she became honorary secretary of the *Women's Trade Union League* and moved an equal-pay motion at the 1888 Trades Union Congress. In 1889, she helped to form the *Women's Trade Union Association*, which later became the *Women's Industrial Council*.

Black was among the organisers of the Bryant and May strike in 1888. She was also active in the Fabian Society. In 1895 she became editor of *Women's Industrial News*, the journal of the Women's Industrial Council, which encouraged middle-class women to research and report on the conditions of work for poorer women, and by 1914 had investigated almost 120 trades. In 1896 she began to campaign for a legal minimum wage as part of the Consumers

League and credited as being involved in the Bryant & May match company industrial dispute where exploited women workers eventually took action. By the early 1900s Black was also active in the burgeoning women's suffrage campaign, becoming the honorary secretary of the Women's Franchise Declaration Committee, which gathered a petition of 257,000 signatures.

Black joined the *National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)* and the *London Society of Women's Suffrage*. By 1912–1913, Black was acting editor of *The Common Cause* the "organ of the women's movement for reform". She wrote several novels as well as books on the Sweated Industry, Trades Boards and Married Women's Work. She died in 1922.

Amie Hicks and her daughter Margaret have been mentioned before in connection with socialist organisations. In fact most of the active women in this period were campaigning and agitating on several fronts at once: socialism, suffrage and trade unionism. Amie Hicks was no exception. Amie was born in 1839 into a working class family already steeped in social and political struggle. Her father, Richard Cox, a bootmaker, had been an active Chartist and this led her naturally into the emerging socialist movement of the 1880s, joining the SDF in 1883, along with her husband, William Hicks.



In 1889 she founded the *East London Ropemakers' Women's Association* and through it she became active in the *Women's Trade Union Association* and its successor the *Women's Industrial Council*. Amie remained a committed Marxist and went on to become the Women's Organiser for the *British Socialist party (Successor to the SDF)*. She died in 1917.

Mary Reid Macarthur (13 August 1880 – 1 January 1921) was a Scottish suffragist and trades unionist. She was the general secretary of the *Women's Trade Union League* and was involved in the formation of the *National Federation of Women Workers* and *National Anti-Sweating League*.



About 1901, Macarthur became a trade unionist after hearing a speech made by John Turner about how badly some workers were being treated by their employers. Mary became secretary of the Ayr branch of the Shop Assistants' Union, and her interest in this union led to her work for the improvement of women's labour conditions. In 1902 Mary became friends with Margaret Bondfield who encouraged her to attend the union's national conference where Macarthur was elected to the union's national executive.

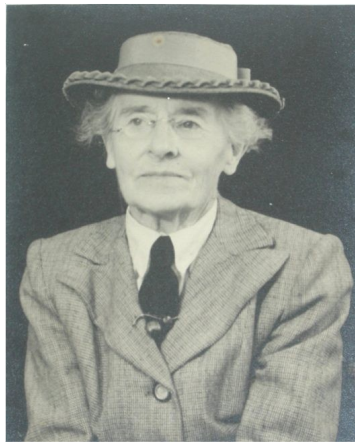
In 1907 she founded the *Women Worker*, a monthly newspaper for women trade unionists. In 1910 Mary Macarthur led the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath who won a battle to establish the right to a fair wage following a 10-week strike.

This landmark victory changed the lives of thousands of workers who were earning little more than 'starvation wages'. In reference to female earnings, Macarthur commented that "women are unorganised because they are badly paid, and poorly paid because they are unorganised.". The Cradley Heath Workers' Institute was funded using money left over from the strike fund of the 1910.

Macarthur stood as Labour Party candidate in Stourbridge, Worcestershire at the General Election on 14 December 1919. She was defeated, as were most anti-war candidates. She continued her work with the *Women's Trade Union League* and played an important role in transforming it into the Women's section of the Trade Union Congress. Mary Macarthur died on 1 January 1921.

Clara Grace James was born in Deptford in 1866. Her father was a tailor. She was orphaned when still a child and brought up by a former employee of her father.

She found work in the confectionery trade, and in 1889 she joined the *Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA)*. As a result, she was sacked from her job, but the WTUA helped her find work as a typist, while she volunteered as an organiser and assistant secretary of the WTUA. Its activist Amie Hicks provided her with accommodation and legally adopted James as her daughter.



Through the WTUA, James founded the Confectioners' Union, and served as its general secretary. She worked with Clementina Black and John Burns to win a strike among chocolate makers in 1890, but the union faced high levels of opposition from employers and a highly mobile workforce, leading to its decline and dissolution in 1892. Thereafter, James focused her efforts on trying to organise box-makers.

Lilian Gilchrist Thompson paid the WTUA £70 a year for two years to employ James as an investigator. James and Hicks were the only two women to give evidence to the 1891 Royal Commission on Labour. James also served as a delegate to the London Trades Council, and for a time was the only woman to do so.

The WTUA was refounded in 1894 as the Women's Industrial Council (WIC), and James remained active within it, serving on both its investigation and organisation committees. However, with her sponsorship having concluded, Thompson instead paid for her training as a gymnastics teacher. Once she had completed this, James set up a series of "Working Girls' Clubs", providing lectures, physical drills, social meetings and citizenship classes. These proved popular, and in 1899 the WIC founded the Clubs Industrial Association to formalise this activity. Among the young women who attended her classes was Margaret Bondfield. James eventually left the Clubs Industrial Association,

founding the rival Working Girls at Play organisation, which by 1909 organised 22 regular clubs across London. She began suffering from poor health and had to give up teaching, retiring to Canvey Island. She founded the Canvey Labour Party and served as a parish councillor and a JP. She also ran a holiday home for working girls from London. She died in 1954 aged 88.