“TO FIGHT, TO STRUGGLE, TO RIGHT THE WRONG”

MARY MACARTHUR

13 AUGUST 1880 – 1 JANUARY 1921
INTRODUCTION

Mary Reid Macarthur, the Scottish founder and leader of the all-female trade union, the National Federation of Women Workers, died on 1 January 1921. This exhibition marks the centenary of her death and celebrates her pioneering work among British women workers. Since her death, there have been more improvements in women’s pay and conditions but history reminds us that many of the issues and challenges faced by the women organized by Macarthur – who were some of the worst paid workers in the country – remain as relevant today as they were then.

‘To Fight, To Struggle, To Right the Wrong’ was the motto of the National Federation of Women Workers.
Mary Macarthur (standing) with her sisters. She was born in Glasgow on 13 August 1880, the eldest of three daughters whose father ran a successful drapery business. After leaving Glasgow’s High School for Girls, she became a book-keeper in the family business after its relocation to Ayr.

Mary’s trade union career began in 1901 when she joined the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks. At the time she was writing part time for a local newspaper and said that she went to “a labour meeting in order to get material for a skit….There were six members on the platform and five in the hall, all jumping up and down and arguing organisation. I had gone there to make fun of the radicals, who held their meetings in a miserable hole above a fish shop but while there on my frivolous errand, I became converted and joined the little band”.

THE YOUNG WOMAN

The life of Mary Macarthur. A TUC Library Exhibition
Margaret Bondfield was one of many people in the British labour movement who saw early and great potential in Mary Macarthur. Bondfield was Assistant Secretary of the Shop Assistants’ Union when she first met Macarthur in 1902. She recalled being struck by her “genius, allied to boundless enthusiasm and leadership of a high order, coming to build our little Union into a more effective instrument”.

Mary’s rise within the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks was rapid. As a very young woman, she became the secretary of the Ayr branch and President of the Union’s Scottish National Council. She was also the first women to be elected to the Shop Assistants’ National Executive.
The life of Mary Macarthur. A TUC Library Exhibition

THE WOMEN’S TRADE UNION LEAGUE

Mary Macarthur came to London in 1903, not long before her 23rd birthday. She became Secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League, which promoted trade unionism among women and campaigned for legislative change to improve women’s working conditions.

“So [Margaret Bondfield] came to my little Westminster flat bringing a tall slip of a thing dressed in black, very silent, but intensely attentive, with that air of subdued excitement which made one feel the air alive all round her, and herself mentally holding out both hands to adventure, adventure which always came”. Gertrude Tuckwell, of the Women’s Trade Union League, describing her first encounter with Mary Macarthur in 1903.

Mary Macarthur’s delegate photograph for the International Congress of Women held in Berlin in 1904. She attended with Margaret Bondfield on behalf of the Women’s Trade Union League.
Below: Committee Minutes of the Women’s Trade Union League from the summer of 1903 discussing Mary Macarthur’s appointment as Secretary. Under her, affiliations to the League increased, more women joined trade unions and new ones were formed.

Mary Macarthur working in Club Union Buildings, Holborn, where the Women’s Trade Union League was based until its move to Bloomsbury in 1909.

Below: The Women’s Trade Union League was constantly in need of funds for its work. Campaigns, organising tours and calls to assist women workers around Britain were expensive and so appeals for funds, as in this letter, were very important.
The difference between men and women’s pay was considerable. Whilst men were paid a ‘family wage’, it was conveniently assumed that women worked only when young and single, with no dependants to support. The reality was very different. Women’s wages could also be reduced by a system of fines and deductions.

Examples of the type of deductions made by bosses to pay women workers as little as possible.

Women brickmakers in the English Midlands. Women worked in an enormous array of industries, from those regarded as ‘women’s trades’ such as garment making, food production and laundry to less ‘ladylike’ ones such as ammunition manufacture and metal working.
The Women’s Trade Union League ran campaigns to highlight dangers encountered in the workplace, including working with chemicals and noxious substances in ill-ventilated workshops and factories.

**WOMEN WORKERS IN THE EARLY 1900s**

In 1908 the Brass Workers’ Union issued a leaflet, expressing concern for women engaged in ‘unhealthy’ work. Its primary concern, however, was that cheap, unorganised women’s labour displaced men. Yet too many unions made little or no effort to recruit women because they believed they would be poor trade unionists. This Coventry leaflet was an attempt to discredit Macarthur by implying that she did not have women’s true interests at heart.
Often women’s work was almost entirely hidden from public view. Some of the worst paid work was carried out in small workshops or in the home where women bore the brunt of scandalously low piece rates in industries including box making, lace finishing, garment making and chain making.

Women chain makers in the Black Country worked excessively long hours in forges attached to their homes. They were sometimes unable to earn seven shillings a week at a time when the Board of Trade estimated a British male labourer’s wage at over 25 shillings.

At the end of the 19th century only about 7 per cent of British trade unionists were women. Mary Macarthur declared: “Women are badly paid and badly treated because they are not organised and they are not organised because they are badly paid and badly treated”.
The weekly budget of a factory ‘girl’ in 1909, drawn up by the Women’s Trade Union League. It illustrates just how hard it was to make ends meet on a low income.

The National Anti-Sweating League, of which Mary Macarthur was a leading member, campaigned for a minimum wage in order to eradicate the sweated trades. These were characterised by very long hours, extremely poor pay and difficult working conditions, which disproportionately affected women.
Mary Macarthur founded the National Federation of Women Workers in 1906. Its aims were to unite and strengthen small female unions, to organise women in some of the worst paid industries in the country and to give members the confidence to become and remain strong trade unionists.

It was a bold and ambitious experiment. By the end of its first year, it had a handful of branches across Britain from Edinburgh to London. By 1918 it had over 60,000 members. Never big, it nevertheless punched above its weight, taking on bosses, co-ordinating strike action and gaining important concessions for women workers. It became a force to be reckoned with, particularly during the First World War when Government could not afford to ignore its representation of women munitions workers.

“With the Federation and the Women’s Trade Union League, Mary Macarthur and Gertrude Tuckwell wrought miracles. With all their camp followers in attendance they were no more than a stage army, but they said they were the women workers of Great Britain, and they made so much noise that they came to be believed”. JJ Mallon of the Anti-Sweating League, colleague and friend of Mary Macarthur.
National Federation of Women Workers’ organisers travelled around the country responding to calls for assistance with disputes, helping to form branches and encouraging grassroots activism. In the years before the First World War its membership grew steadily.

Members could read about branch progress and activities in The Woman Worker, the Federation’s newspaper established by Mary Macarthur in 1907.

Above: in the hot summer of 1911 thousands of women workers in food preparation factories in Bermondsey, London struck for better pay. The National Federation of Women Workers supported and enrolled women and forced some employers to increase wages. The image shows women on strike from Pinks’ Jam Factory.

One of hundreds of press cuttings collected by the Women’s Trade Union League’s Gertrude Tuckwell, highlighting women’s trade union organisation.
Examples of disputes in which the Federation was involved. Above: the Kilbirnie Net Workers who went on strike in 1913. Bottom: strikers from Morton’s jam and pickles factory in East London in 1914.
In the summer of 1908, women workers at the Corruganza Box Making factory in London’s Summerstown struck against imposed reductions. A procession and demonstration were captured on a series of postcards produced by the National Federation of Women Workers to raise strike funds. Four of these are reproduced here showing Mary Macarthur with the strikers and addressing crowds from the plinth in Trafalgar Square.
The Cradley Heath Chainmakers’ Lock Out in 1910 is one of the Federation’s most well-known strikes. Despite the minimum wage promised by the 1909 Trade Board Act, employers still sought ways to carry on paying the women at the old, very low levels. Expertly led by Mary Macarthur, after ten weeks on strike the women established their right to the minimum wage, resulting in significant pay increases. Local membership of the National Federation of Women Workers increased significantly.
Women’s trade unionism expanded significantly during the First World War and the National Federation of Women Workers was heavily involved in the organisation of women employed in war work, establishing many strong branches with thousands of members in centres of munitions production.

Making munitions was extremely dangerous and trade unions pushed not just for fair pay but for safer working conditions.

Mary Macarthur (centre) and key Federation workers in 1916. Macarthur expanded her team of organisers in order to keep up constant pressure on Government and employers to ensure that promises of fair pay and safe working conditions for women workers were kept.
Workers at Cleator Mills, Cumbria in 1915. Despite having a government contract for essential war work on army uniform production, the wages paid by the firm were extremely low and hours excessively long. A strike resulted in a ten per cent pay rise, a special War Bonus and full recognition of the Federation.

An example of the Federation's expansion during the War. From *The Woman Worker*, 1918.
At the end of the First World War, the National Federation of Women Workers was widely recognised for championing women’s rights in the workplace. As women’s essential war service was readily forgotten, new challenges lay ahead. Federation organisers worked around the clock as many women war workers were laid off. Focus shifted once again to organising amongst women who had no choice but to take low paid work including domestic service, laundry and food preparation.
A strike of laundry workers in Hull in 1920. Women here sought higher wages and objected to the firm's excessive use of overtime.

Right: On 1 January 1921 the Federation became the Women's Section of the larger and mixed gender National Union of General Workers, concluding two years of merger talks. Mary Macarthur had expressed her regret but recognised that, “The whole tendency is towards amalgamation – fewer Unions and more unity….If in our pride of number and satisfaction with what we have accomplished, we decided to go on as a single organisation, there is no doubt that in a few years we should be left high and dry and isolated. We ought to anticipate the tendency of the times rather than allow it to overtake us”. With justifiable pride she declared that, “Our influence has been enormous”. 
By 1918 Mary Macarthur had become a hugely respected figure in the British labour movement, with a reputation as a great leader, communicator, negotiator and socialist. She was adopted as the prospective Labour candidate for Stourbridge, Worcestershire and campaigned hard in the General Election of December 1918. Although she did not win the seat, her popularity assured her re-selection for a future election. It seemed as though a parliamentary career beckoned.

Right: a pamphlet acknowledging Mary’s popularity in Stourbridge and guaranteeing support from ‘all the loyal and devoted friends’ there and in the adjacent Black Country where the women chain makers had not forgotten her leadership of their 1910 strike.
These are the first two pages of Mary Macarthur’s Election Manifesto which highlighted her commitment to international peace, to the need for a million new homes, for nationalisation of the vital industries and her belief in the partnership of men and women at work as well as in the home.

**FELLOW CITIZENS**

At the request of the Stockbridge Divisional Labour Party, I have cordially agreed to stand as candidate for the Division in the approaching Parliamentary Election. My candidature is supported by the National Labour Party, and has the warm support of the Radical Union of Women Workers. I stand for the Aims and Objects of the Labour Party, with uncompromising sympathy and understanding. My enemies may be defeated; they may be exiled; but the principles for which I stand will endure. My enemies may be atoned for by the payment of a penalty, but the principles for which I stand will endure. All objects can be compromised—retrenchment and hard times, the suspicion of the national defence and national justice, the destruction of the national wealth and the national industry, but the principles for which I stand will endure.

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**MY FOURTEEN POINTS**

1. **A PEOPLE’S PEACE**
   
   The principle of this is that peace is the best policy of the world. If we are at peace with the world, we shall be at peace with ourselves. Peace is the only way to safety and security. Peace is the only way to reform and progress. Peace is the only way to prosperity and happiness. Peace is the only way to a healthy and contented life.

2. **JUSTICE, NOT CHAOS**
   
   Justice is the foundation of all social order. Without justice, there can be no peace. Without justice, there can be no prosperity. Without justice, there can be no happiness. Without justice, there can be no progress. Justice is the foundation of all social order. Without justice, there can be no peace. Without justice, there can be no prosperity. Without justice, there can be no happiness. Without justice, there can be no progress.

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Mary Macarthur died on 1 January 1921, aged 40, the very day that the National Federation of the Women Workers merged with the National Union of General Workers. There were many tributes to a woman widely considered to have been an outstanding trade union leader. Her death from cancer came less than two years after her husband, the Labour politician William Crawford Anderson, died during the Spanish flu pandemic.

“Women in industry are for all time in her debt”. Violet Markham, writer and campaigner

“In the passing of Mary Macarthur the world is poorer by one big soul, and many of us have lost not merely a co-worker but a dear friend’. Robert Smillie, miners’ trade union leader

DEATH OF A LEADER
“A wholehearted fighter for economic and political justice”
JJ Mallon, Anti-Sweating League

‘It was by the charm of her comradeship that she led men and women along the path she desired them to take’
Beatrice Webb, social reformer
Amongst the Mary Macarthur Papers is this heartbreaking letter written by Mary in April 1920 to her four-year-old daughter, Nancy, with the instruction on the envelope for it to be opened on her fourteenth birthday. At the time Mary was recovering in the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Women’s Hospital, London, after the first of two operations.

‘My dear wee girl,

This is just to tell you that there is only one thing will make me sorry to leave this place and that is that I may not surround my precious little daughter with a sheltering love through the years of her childhood and girlhood.

But if love is indeed deathless, and surely it must be, mine will still surround you long after my body is dust. So dear, when you are lonely or sad or quiet think that your father and mother to whom you meant so much are near you and that you still mean much to them.

Be good dear Heart and do something worth while if you can. At any rate try to. Never cease to aspire. That is the secret of happiness – a stretching out quite leads to higher things.

Oh my dear my dear. This is my goodbye to you, though when you read it I will have been long away, and you will not remember the light grey eyes or the sound of my voice.

I pray for your happiness my darling, and for complete fulfilment.

Your mother,

Mary’
The Mary Macarthur Memorial Committee was established in 1921. It aimed ‘to equip women of [Macarthur’s] own spirit to serve humanity as she served it’. Under the Mary Macarthur Educational Trust a scholarship scheme was set up to provide trade union women with the chance to study, offering grants for fees, books and travel. The Committee also sought to ‘succour women who are in a condition of pain and illness’ through the Mary Macarthur Holiday Trust, which offered free or subsidised holidays for working women. Although there are no longer Macarthur Holiday Homes, like the ones below, the Trust continues today to offer financial support to women in need of a break.

The Gables, Ongar in Essex was the first Mary Macarthur Holiday House to be opened in 1922. In time this was replaced by another Home in Stansted.
Women appreciated the chance to rest: “It is blessing that there are such places for tired working women”.

“I did feel a little scared at coming but when I arrived your welcome smile put me at my ease and I knew then I was going to have a very nice holiday”.

“You are not lonely at Mary Macarthur’s”.

Further Homes were established in Littlehampton, Sussex and Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire.
“A Trade Union is like a bundle of sticks. The workers are bound together and have the strength of unity. No employer can do as he likes with them. They have the power of resistance. They can resist reductions in wages. They can ask for an advance without fear. A worker who is not in a Union is like a single stick. She can easily be broken or bent to the will of her employer. She has not power to resist a reduction in wages. If she is fined she must pay without complaint. She dare not ask for a rise. If she does she will be told, “If you do not like it you can leave it”. She will be told, “Your place is outside the gate – there are plenty to take your place”. An employer can do without one worker. He cannot do without all his workers. If all the workers united in a union – strong as the bundle of sticks – complain or ask for improved conditions, the employer is bound to listen.”

Mary Macarthur, The Woman Worker, September 1907
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WOMEN AND TRADE UNIONS TODAY

Above: Beth Farhat (front-row, third left), head of TUC Northern, with Women in Leadership course participants in Parliament 2018.

Above: Frances O’Grady speaking at TUC conference Brighton. Frances has been General Secretary of the TUC since 2013.

TUC Women’s Conference 2014 (initiating a campaign on childcare support). From the 1920s the TUC has organised this annual meeting of women representatives from the affiliated unions.

“Increasingly, the union movement is led by women, shaped by women, winning for women. Today, women are more likely to belong to a union than men. A new generation of women activists, officers and leaders is emerging. Equality and inclusively are the cornerstones of trade unionism and the workplace is a microcosm for society. The trade union movement is driving the equality agenda forward both inside and outside of the work environment; setting positive precedents through both individual representation and collective bargaining.” Beth Farhat (Regional Secretary TUC Northern) – Women need unions and unions need women.
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Cathy Hunt is the author of Righting the Wrong, Mary Macarthur 1880-1921. The Working Woman’s Champion a biography of Mary Macarthur published by History West Midlands in 2019 and The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921 published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014. For more information, go to cathyhunthistorian.com
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