

MARY MACARTHUR

CHAINMAKERS' CHAMPION

Mark Curthoys

Mary Reid Macarthur (1880–1921) is best remembered for improving conditions for working women in the Black Country. Despite a prosperous and Conservative background, she was converted to trade unionism while working as a bookkeeper in her father's drapery business.

In 1903 Macarthur moved to London, where she became secretary to the Women's Trade Union League. There she found that the small, independent unions for women, which the League promoted, lacked the finance to carry weight in wage bargaining. In 1906 she founded a union for women in all trades, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), able to build up financial resources to back wage demands with the threat of effective strikes.

The Sweating Trades

Macarthur's preoccupation was women's low pay. The extreme case was 'sweating': work which paid so little that, even by working long hours six days a week, an adult could not afford proper food, clothing, or sanitary housing. It particularly applied to women working in tailoring at home, who were supplied with materials and paid by middlemen.

In 1907 Macarthur appeared before a House of Commons Select Committee on Home Work. Her testimony exposed the working of the system and put the case for trade boards to set minimum wages in the industries where sweating was rife. This was taken up by the Liberal government in 1909.

The Women Chainmakers

Sweating was notorious in the metal trades of the Black Country. Macarthur became one of the representatives of the workers on the trade board to fix minimum wages in chainmaking, where the Black Country represented 90 per cent of British production. After weeks of negotiations, the employers agreed to roughly double the women's earnings. But many smaller employers tried to avoid paying the new rate by exploiting loopholes in the law.



Mary Macarthur engages the crowd in Cradley Heath during the women chainmakers' strike in 1910.

Macarthur threw the weight of the NFWW behind a strike of 800 Cradley Heath women chainmakers, from August to October 1910.

Macarthur's appeals to public opinion swelled the strike fund. An inspiring speaker, she also used the cinema to promote the strikers' cause. Invoking the symbols of anti-slavery, she arranged for strikers to appear at meetings holding up chains. The recalcitrant employers gave way. A surplus was left over from the strike fund, which was used to build the Workers' Institute in Cradley

Heath, as a centre for educational, social, and trade union activities.

During the First World War, Macarthur campaigned to ensure fair wages and conditions for women munitions workers. In the election of 1918, she was the Labour Party candidate for Stourbridge, but her defeat by the sitting Liberal was ascribed to the insistence of the returning officer that she appear on ballot forms under the surname of her husband (the Labour MP W. C. Anderson), rather than as Macarthur, by which she had become famous. Her achievements are recalled by the preservation of the Workers' Institute at the Black Country Living Museum, and by the annual Chainmakers' Festival.

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Further Reading

Angela V. John, 'Macarthur, Mary Reid', in *Oxford DNB*. Freely available online with your public library card at www.oxforddnb.com

See a memorial exhibition to Mary Macarthur at the preserved Workers' Institute, Black Country Living Museum. Visit www.bclm.co.uk to download information sheets.