

FORWARD SISTERS!

Local Women in Politics

The Labour League and Trade Unions

At the dawn of the twentieth century women of all political persuasions found increasing benefits in acting collectively.

Ruth Banton (1870-1952)

Ruth was born in Cambridgeshire, the daughter of a farm labourer, George Elbourn. She came first to Nottinghamshire and then to Leicester through her work with the Salvation Army. It was here that she met her husband George Banton, a leading member of the Leicester Independent Labour Party. Ruth was at his side as George rose from Town Councillor and Alderman to Mayor of Leicester in 1925. He also served as Labour MP for the Eastern Division of the town from 1922 to 1927.



Like her husband, Ruth was a committed Socialist. Along with Margaret MacDonald, the wife of Labour's first MP in Leicester, she was a founder member of the local Women's Labour League in 1906 and instrumental in arranging for the League's inaugural conference to be held in Leicester in June that year. Ruth served as President in 1915.

After the war, Ruth continued her work with the League, now known as the Labour Party's Women's Section, serving as secretary until 1920. She remained longer on the Executive Committee becoming Treasurer in 1921. In 1924, Ruth became the first woman to be elected as Vice-President of the Leicester Independent Labour Party.

In addition to her Labour activism, Ruth was heavily involved as Secretary in the Leicester Women's Insurance Advisory Board which helped to explain the 1911 National Insurance Act. As a keen member of the National Union of Women Workers, she served on numerous committees concerning infant welfare and maternity issues. She was also elected as a Poor Law Guardian in 1913, 1919, 1925 and 1928.

Annie Stretton (1858-1931)

Annie came from Shropshire and was the daughter of a lead miner. Whilst working as a lady's maid in Tutbury, she met her husband Harry Stretton. Newly married in 1884, they moved to Leicester so that Harry could take up work with the Midland Railway. Of their six children, only three were to survive to adulthood.



Both Annie and Harry joined the Independent Labour Party and Harry became a member of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Workers, serving as their representative on the Leicester Trades Council. When the Railway Women's Guild was formed in 1895 to provide support amongst the wives and daughters of railway workers, Annie played a prominent role. Becoming President, she travelled widely around the country speaking at annual conferences including that held at Leicester in 1906. As such she was closely involved in the formation of the Leicester branch of the Women's Labour League as the Leicester Pioneer reported:

'A well attended meeting was held at Mrs Banton's home ...on Wednesday evening 14 March to hear a report from Mrs Barnes, Mrs Cox and Mrs J R MacDonald of a meeting of women members of the Labour party, held in London the previous Friday. This meeting had been summoned by the executive of the Railway Women's Guild to consider the better organisation of the women who are sympathetic with Labour politics and it had been decided to form a Women's Labour League in connection with the Labour Party.'

At the annual conference of the Women's Labour League in Hull in 1908, Mrs Cox spoke of local work petitioning the town council in favour of feeding necessitous school children at the public expense whilst Annie urged the importance of taking an active part in the Labour Party.

Annie was elected as a Guardian for the Abbey ward in 1913 and served until 1922 when she stood as a Labour candidate in the town councillor elections for the same ward. She lost by a narrow margin and it was left to her grand daughter Janet Setchfield to be the first woman in the family to become a town councillor when she was elected in 1970.

Margaret MacDonald (1870-1911)

As the wife of the Leicester MP Ramsay MacDonald, Margaret took a great interest in the working women of Leicester.



Lizzie Willson (1875-1926)

Elizabeth Rebecca Willson, known always as Lizzie, was born in Islington, the daughter of Levi Willson, a railway porter originally from Mowsley. The family settled eventually in Leicester where her mother, Rebecca had been born. At an early age, Lizzie became a heel builder in the boot and shoe industry and in 1904, she was elected secretary of the women's section of the National Union of the Boot and Shoe Operatives - a section still staffed entirely by men. In 1910, with her colleague Alice Hawkins - better known for her Suffragette activities - Lizzie won a place on the Leicester Trades Council.

At this stage, men in the industry were earning an average of 15 shillings a week more than women. However, Lizzie's efforts to highlight the disparity were resented by the employers - and the men. Male trade Unionists argued that the Union should concentrate on securing higher wages for men so that they could keep their families. No thought was given to single women or widows.

Declaring that 'A man is not fit to arbitrate in a woman's cause', Lizzie and Alice formed a breakaway Union for women in the industry in 1911 which existed until around 1930. The historian of the men's Union was scathing:

'It is highly probable that the wider sex war aroused by the suffragette movement affected also the responses of the men, though it would probably not have done so but for the personality of Lizzie Willson herself.'

It is a pity that so little survives to tell us the story from Lizzie's point of view...

Women Boot and Shoe Operatives.

ENTHUSIASTIC GATHERING.
The Butchers Hall in Queen-street was filled to its utmost capacity on Wednesday evening, when hundreds of women workers, the majority of them formerly members of the Leicester No. 3 (Women's) Branch of the Boot and Shoe Operatives, met to discuss matters relating to their present position, and their future course of action.
Mrs. Hawkins occupied the chair, and was supported by several members of the Executive of the projected new Independent National Union of Boot and Shoe Women Workers. At the outset a resolution was carried authorising the officials of the late branch to take corresponding positions in the new organisation.
Miss E. Willson (the Secretary) delivered one of her characteristic fighting speeches, which was punctuated with cheers by the audience.
She regretted very much the secession from the National Boot and Shoe Union, but it was not their doing (hear, hear). They were simply cut off because they would not bow to the Union's dictates and demands. Their differences, would have been settled in a short time if the Council had listened to their requests. The matter was only trivial. They had had a struggle in the past to hold their own, and the struggle would be greater now. Miss Willson dwelt on the difficulties of organising women, but said they were making a determined stand for Labour. She appealed to the members to take an intelligent interest in the Union and endeavour to induce their fellow workers to join. The more firm and loyal they were to their Union the higher wages they would

secure. She wished to make it clear that there was no antagonism between the Union and the Men's Union. They were each working for their sex.
As this speaker severed the audience demanded that she should be elected from the National Union in consideration of the accumulated funds of the No. 3 branch.
After some interruption, Miss Willson professed, and said they would appeal to all the Trade Unions throughout the country for support. "They had done nothing to be ashamed of," and she desired that any rule of the present Union had been broken by the secession. They claimed that the men's Union had no right to take such a high hand as they had done. "The women," said Miss Willson, "and the greatest asset the Union had ever had" (cheers). She urged them against paying their contributions at the head office, as advised by certain posters which were being carried round the town. She did not have much trouble with the employers of labour, who, when they see that the women are determined, would not stand out long. The new Union would be affiliated to the Women's Trade League, and could rely on support from that body. The members were better off than before, as they did not get any benefit at all from the Arbitration Board, from which they would now be free.
Miss Willson here referred to the recent trouble at Messrs. Black's, of Wigston. She explained the position from her point of view, and cries of indignation arose when particulars of the women's wage were mentioned. "The women," she said, "were not out for more work, but more wages. They were not satisfied with 2s. or 4s. a week. They wanted 5s. They were willing, however, to come to a reasonable settlement with Messrs. Black's. They did not want to fight the employers; they wanted to work in unity with them. But they must have a living wage for every woman in a factory (cheers). For the present they would go on just the same with regard to benefits, but later they were hoping to increase them."
Concluding Miss Willson said it was a case of sink or swim. She urged the women to stick to their organisation, and they would be able to raise their wages to a higher standard (cheers).
The meeting concluded amid excitement. As the result of demands a resolution was proposed demanding that a portion of the contribution paid to the National Union during the last two years be refunded.
This was carried with enthusiasm, and the meeting terminated amidst cheers.

WOMEN'S LABOUR LEAGUE.
[TO THE EDITOR.]
Sir,—May I put in a few words on the above subject to answer Mr. Gould that the Leicester branch of the above League has at any rate sufficient vitality to have made a very good impression at the recent annual conference which we held on May 18th in London? Miss Edith Barnes made her first public speech in giving her report of work done, and I heard a great many delegates from different parts agreeing that it was not likely to be her last appearance in public work since she put what she had to say brightly and effectively. Miss Bell, too, did credit to Leicester by the interesting and practical speech in which she opened a discussion on the work of women as Labour Guardians. The other two Leicester delegates also took part in our business deliberations, whilst five other members of the branch came up as visitors at their own expense. Our work is not intended to be always in the public view; we aim in great part at educating ourselves in social and political questions and Labour principles. However, I can safely leave the local women to tell Mr. Gould of their work, though it seems strange that he should get out of his way to make his inquiries through the columns of the "Pioneer" since his wife and daughter are both members of the branch and have both held official positions. I thought, however, I could give a "testimonial" to the branch as far as their London appearance is concerned which modesty would prevent the local members from giving themselves.—Edith Bell.
MARGARET B. MACDONALD.
3, Lincoln Inn Fields, London.
June 18th, 1907.