

Women's Stories

100 years of Queensland women's right to vote

Emma Miller (1839-1917)

- seamstress
- early member of the trade union movement
- suffragette – president of Women's Equal Franchise Association
- president, Women Workers Political Union
- pacifist

Emma Miller was born in England in 1839. Her family were rebel Chartists. They believed in equal political rights for all (not just the wealthy). Chartists sought improved living conditions for working class people.

In England, Emma trained as a seamstress, learning all aspects of the trade from pattern-making and measuring to hand-finishing. This set her apart from other women who sewed. She was able to call herself a 'gentlemen's white shirt maker'.

Emma came to Queensland in 1879 with her husband and children. Within two years, she was widowed. Emma used her sewing skills to earn a living. Because of her specialist skills, she was able to command more money than women sewing in workrooms. But she still had to work 12 hour days, six days a week, to complete a dozen dress shirts.

A Royal Commission into Shops, Factories and Workshops was held in Queensland in 1891. Emma testified against sweatshop operations that were forcing women to work very long hours for very little money.

She encouraged women to join the trade union movement to improve their working conditions and pay.

Emma also travelled through country Queensland encouraging men to join the Australian Workers Union.

In 1894, a group of women met to form a lobby group to push for electoral reform. They wanted the right to vote. But they only wanted that right extended to women who held property – just as it was for Queensland men.

Emma Miller believed in 'one person, one vote'.



This illustration from The Worker newspaper of February 12 1912, condemns the behaviour of police who were accused of brutality in dealing with the workers' protests on "Black Friday". Emma Miller was a legendary figure in the protests.

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A plural voting system existed at the time. This enabled a man who owned land to vote in as many electorates as he had property. It also meant that itinerant workers who did not own a home could not cast a vote. Adopting plural voting for women would mean 60,000 of Queensland's 80,000 women still would not get a vote.

In April 1894, a stacked meeting of the Women's Equal Franchise Association saw Emma Miller elected president and 'one person, one vote' adopted as its platform.

Women supporters of plural voting left WEFA to form a splinter group, the Women's Suffrage League.

Emma Miller remained WEFA president until 1905, campaigning tirelessly for women to have the right to vote.

She also became president of the Women Worker's Political Union, established in 1903.

In 1912, Emma led a procession of women supporting striking tram workers through Brisbane streets. They were confronted by armed police. A riot broke out. The day is known as Black Friday. At the height of the fight, Emma stuck her hatpin into the rump of a horse carrying Police Commissioner Patrick Cahill. He fell, and limped forever. Emma was unhurt.

Emma was a pacifist, opposed to conscription. During World War One, she was vice-president of the Women's Peace Army. She became president of the Queensland Anti-Conscription Campaign Executive women's auxiliary in 1916. She joined a campaign against a referendum seeking compulsory military training of Australians with a view to serving overseas. Men and women rejected the referendum proposal at the ballot box in October 1916.

Emma Miller died in Toowoomba, Queensland, in January 1917.

The Worker newspaper described Emma Miller like this:

"She was only a little handful – so frail in body – but she had the courage of a lion and her energy was marvellous... Her keen intellect, her magnetic personality and above all her wonderful devotion to the cause were a continual source of inspiration ... as a champion of the rights of women she was without equal..."

25 January 1917