

Emma Miller (1839 - 1917)



Portrait of Mrs Emma Miller. John Oxley Collection, State Library of Queensland neg No 86511.

Emma worked hard all her life for women's rights. Emma left school at 14 because she had to help her parents feed a large family. Even though she was very clever, in her day there was very little opportunity for working class children to further their education. She trained as a seamstress in England, sewing shirts for a living working a twelve hour day, six days per week.

After arriving in Brisbane, Emma worked long hours as a gentlemen's shirtmaker. As a seamstress she gave evidence at the 1891 Royal Commission into Shops, Factories and Workshops, that highlighted the existence of many sweatshops that exploited women workers.

Emma became famous as a rebel fighting for equal pay for equal work and universal suffrage – votes for all

On 2 February 1912, known as Black Friday at the height of a general strike Emma led a large contingent of women to Parliament House avoiding police with fixed bayonets. On their return from the rally the women were charged by baton swinging police. The women defended themselves with handbags and hatpins.

In 1894 Emma joined and later became president of the Women's Equal Franchise Association, remaining in this position until Queensland women attained the vote in 1905.

Emma was a leader in the campaign against mandatory military service (conscription) during World War I. The campaign against the first conscription referendum in 1916 was a success, attributed by many historians to the strong women in the anti-conscription movement.

Emma has left a lasting legacy in Queensland. One lasting memorial is Emma Miller Place; this green space is a popular site for rallies and social activism in central Brisbane.