27 March 2023

Julia Varley: Pocket Dreadnought

Jackie's blog for Women's History Month on the theme "Celebrating Women Who Tell our Stories", is about Julia Varley, a passionate campaigner for women's rights.

Julia was born in 1871 in Bradford, where I live, and is buried there in an unassuming grave. She was one of seven children and the granddaughter of Joseph Alderson, a veteran of the Peterloo campaign. Julia worked long hours in a woollen mill, she raised her siblings after their mother died, and undertook union duties having straight away joined the General Union of Textile Workers. The pressure of time is something I still experience, but, like Julia, it does not deter me and it is easier now than then. Julia, like us, had a passion to improve the rights of workers. She became an advocate for workers, encouraging membership of the union, both in an organising and supporting capacity.

Conditions were poor, pay was dreadful, so what did Julia do? As well as being arrested twice and serving time in Holloway prison as a suffragette, Julia did what we are doing now. She organised her fellow workers and formed the National Federation of Women Workers and went on to support successful strikes by chain makers and bakers in Birmingham. Described as a 'Pocket Dreadnought' Julia became a member of the Birmingham Trades Council which is quite an achievement given the time period.

She did not stop there: she supported the Workers Union as the only female organiser in a 5,000 strong Cornish Clay workers' strike. Then Julia set to with a workers' charter for domestic staff; it covered hours to be worked, time off, a minimum wage, their own bedrooms, employers to pay for uniforms and that workers would be addressed by their proper names!

In failing health Julia returned to Bradford where she died aged 81 and was buried in [Undercliffe Cemetery](#) where I came across her and her story. An extraordinary woman and a pioneering trade unionist who paved the way for me and you and the work we do now.

[Read more about Julia on the TUC150 website](#).