

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### MURIEL AGNES HEAGNEY

(1885-1974)

#### Trade Unionist and Writer

1885	Born 31 December in Brisbane, Queensland
1890's	Family moved to Melbourne, Victoria
1906	Joined the Political Labor Council (PLC)
1909	Delegate to the Women's Central Organizing Committee of PLC
1915	Committee member of the Workers' Educational Association
1919 – 1920	Worked for Federated Unions of Australia on their submission to the Commonwealth Royal Commission on the basic wage
1921 – 1923	Secretary of the Australian Relief Fund for Stricken Europe
1923 and 1927	Prepared cost of living schedules for the Clothing Trades' Union for its submissions on a uniform basic wage for both sexes
1924 – 1925	Spent two years overseas
1926 – 1927	Committee member of the Victorian Central Executive of the Labor Party
1928	Presented the paper <i>The trade union women</i> at the first Pan-Pacific Women's Conference, Honolulu
1930	Formed the Unemployed Girls' Relief Movement, and unsuccessfully contested the Booroondara by-election
1935	Published <i>Are women taking men's jobs?</i>
1937	Helped to found the Council of Action for Equal Pay
1936 – 1942	Worked for Queensland Tourist Bureau in Sydney to support herself
1943 – 1947	Women's organizer for the Amalgamated Engineering Union
1948	Wrote <i>Equal pay for the sexes</i>
1954	Wrote <i>Arbitration at the crossroads</i>
1955	Secretary of the Women's Central Organizing Committee of Labor Party and ex officio member of the central executive
1974	Died 14 May at St Kilda, Victoria

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**Muriel Agnes Heagney** was born in Brisbane to Annie Agnes (Curry) and Patrick Reginald Heagney, a publican and later a carpenter. She was educated at a Richmond convent and trained as a primary school teacher. During World War I she was active in anti-conscription campaigns, and worked as the first female clerk in the Defence Department, where, there being no female rate, she received equal pay at a time when women were being paid 54% of a male wage. From then on Muriel devoted her working life to campaigning for equal wages for women, as she felt that this was central to their achieving equality of status and opportunity.

Brought up in a political household with strong associations with the labour movement and the Labor Party, Muriel followed in the footsteps of her activist father. He was an early member of the Australian Workers' Union; founded the Richmond (Victoria) branch of the Political Labor Council (PLC), and was secretary of its central executive for six years. Muriel joined the Richmond branch in 1906, and in three years later was its delegate to the Women's Central Organizing Committee; the first of many committees on which she served over several decades.

In 1919, Muriel prepared a submission on behalf of the Federated Unions of Australia on the average worker's family expenses, and the subsequent Royal Commission recommended that an increase in the basic was necessary to cover necessities. When this was rejected *as more than the humblest class of worker could expect*, the unions replied with *The basic wage betrayal* written by Muriel Heagney.

After spending two years working for the Australian Relief Fund for Stricken Europe, which assisted those whose lives had been disrupted by the war, she travelled to Europe where she visited Russia; worked for the International Labour Organisation in Geneva; and attended the first British Commonwealth Labour Conference in London.

During the depression in 1930, when unemployed men sometimes received financial relief from local councils, Muriel helped the many desperate women whose husbands or fathers were either absent or unemployed by forming the Unemployed Girls' Relief Movement. This established sewing centres where women made saleable clothing in return for a relief allowance, and set up a jam factory.

Meanwhile, Muriel continued with her main objective of achieving equal pay for women. To counter propaganda that, following on from their wartime work, women were taking men's jobs and thus contributing to general unemployment, she published *Are women taking men's jobs?* in which she successfully demonstrated that they weren't! Muriel was a founding member of the Council of Action for Equal Pay which was established in Sydney under the auspices of the New South Wales branch of the Federated Clerks' Union. She served as honorary secretary until 1949 when it was disbanded.

She was encouraged when, having attended the International Labour Organisation Conference in New York in 1941, she believed that equal pay was imminent. However, at the end of World War II, even though women in 'male' industries were receiving 75% of the male rate of pay, women in 'traditional female' jobs were still receiving only 54%.

In 1948 Muriel wrote *Equal pay for the sexes*, and submitted her last equal pay case in 1949 via the Council of Action for Equal Pay. She retired in 1950.

After retiring, Muriel unsuccessfully applied for a grant from the Commonwealth Literary Fund to write a history of the labor movement. She died in poverty in St. Kilda, Victoria on 14 May 1974 aged eighty nine. She had lived long enough to see the Australian Government accept the principle of equal pay for equal work, and grant women an adult minimum wage. She was cremated after devoting her life to helping the cause of the working woman.

### **Published Works**

*The basic wage betrayal* (approx 1919-1920)

Amalgamated Clothing & Allied Trades' Union, cost of living investigation (1927);  
printed circulars from various branches of the Union (1956-1962)

\**Are women taking men's jobs?* (1935)

Federated Clerks' Union of Australia, draft statements on the war in Europe (1939)

Melbourne Trades Hall Council: Equal Pay Committee, pamphlets, booklets, etc.  
(1940-1967)

Australian Paper Mills Employees' Union, typescript *Australian women in industry in wartime* (1942)

Amalgamated Engineering Union, logbook on activities, including reports on different factories (1943-1945)  
*Equal pay for the sexes* (1948)  
ACTU bulletins and executive decisions (1951-1958)  
Waterside Workers' Federation, printed pamphlets and press statements (1954-1961)  
*Arbitration at the crossroads* (1954)

### **Sources**

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Dugan, M & Günter, A *Women make Australian history* MacMillan 1996  
\*Heagney, M *Are women taking men's jobs?* Hilton & Veitch 1935  
Nairn, B & Serle, G (eds) *Australian dictionary of biography* Vol 9 1891-1939 Melbourne University Press 1983  
\*Radi, Heather *200 Australian women: a Redress anthology* Women's Redress Press 1988  
[www.atua.org.au](http://www.atua.org.au)  
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[www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/rebelwomen/brazen/htm](http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/rebelwomen/brazen/htm)

\*Held in JSNWL

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