

# Women Pioneers In Michigan Labor

For over a hundred years, women have played a major role in building the Michigan labor movement. Ever since Matilda Rabinowitz Robbins mounted a soapbox to organize workers at the Ford Highland Park plant in 1913, and Anna “Big Annie” Clemenc, helped lead the 1913 copper miners’ strike in the Upper Peninsula, women have inspired and led worker struggles throughout the decades.

In 2018 the Michigan Labor History Society honored women who built Michigan’s labor movement at its annual meeting. Elise Bryant, a native Detroiter and national president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), chaired the event, and members of the MLHS Program Committee read reports on several of the women.

Here are brief biographies of some of Michigan’s pioneer women leaders:

**ANNA “BIG ANNIE” CLEMENC** was the wife and daughter of copper miners and lived most of her life in Calumet prior to the 1913 strike by 15,000 miners. She was revered as the “Joan of Arc of Calumet” for her role in leading mass parades and demonstrations. One of the tragedies during the strike was the death of 73 people, mostly children, who suffocated while trying to descend a narrow staircase at Calumet’s Italian Hall during a party for miners’ children.

**GENORA JOHNSON DOLLINGER** organized the Women’s Emergency Brigade in Flint at the age of 23 to help defend sit-down strikers at the General Motors Corporation. Armed with clubs, the women fought GM’s Pinkerton strikebreakers. Dollinger played a key role in developing a strategy to capture GM’s Plant Four, which helped bring a successful end to the strike, resulting in GM recognizing the United Auto Workers union.

**DOROTHY HAENER** rose from union ranks to become an International Representative of the UAW who advanced the position of women in the labor movement as a founding member of the National Organization for Women and the Coalition of Labor Union Women. She was a co-chair of the Michigan Task Force on Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and coordinated the 1983 national conference celebrating International Women’s Year, held in Detroit.

**LILLIAN HATCHER** joined UAW Local 742 at Briggs Manufacturing during World War II after noticing that African-American women were passed over for promotions to riveter positions. Her work in the local union and the wartime Double-V movement for equal rights led her to become the first black woman to be appointed a UAW International Representative. She served in the UAW Fair Practice and Anti-Discrimination Dept. and, as a delegate to the 1961-62 Michigan Constitutional Convention, she helped establish Michigan’s Civil Rights Commission.

**ERMA HENDERSON**, perhaps best known as the first African-American woman to serve as a Detroit city council member, including being named its president, had a background both in social work and labor. She was the first African-American woman to serve as the Detroit Port Clerk for the National Maritime Union, and, later, with Coleman Young, was an early leader of the National Negro Labor Council, founded in 1950 to fight employment discrimination.

**MILDRED "MILLIE" JEFFREY** was the first director of the UAW Women's Bureau, and organized the first UAW women's conference, in response to the massive post-World War II layoffs of female production workers. She later ran the UAW's radio station WDET, directed the union's Community Relations Dept., and directed the UAW Consumer Affairs Dept. from 1968 until her retirement in 1976. She served on the Wayne State University Board of Governors and was a founding member of the National Women's Political Caucus.

**EDELMIRA LOPEZ** was a leader in Lansing's Latino/a community and worked on the local team of the United Farm Workers, taking part in activities like the grape boycott that supported the rights of farm workers in Michigan and throughout the U.S. She played an integral part in Cesar Chavez's visits to the Lansing area by promoting events for Chavez and his team. She has been named to Michigan's Women's Hall of Fame

**OLGA MADAR** was the first woman elected to the executive board of the UAW and in 1970 became the union's first female International Vice President. Earlier, she had served as Director of Recreation for the UAW where her first assignment was seeking the elimination of discrimination in organized bowling. As a result of her work the American Bowling Congress and the Women's International Bowling Congress dropped their "white only" membership policies in 1952. She was an early leader of the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

**MARY ELLEN RIORDAN** was President of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and a Vice President of the American Federation of Teachers. After intense lobbying by her and others, the Michigan legislature passed the Public Employee Relations Act, providing collective-bargaining rights for public workers. Riordan went on to negotiate landmark gains in teacher salaries and working conditions, and to participate in state and national campaigns to improve education for poor and minority students. She was the only classroom teacher in Michigan to participate in President Kennedy's 1963 meeting on Civil Rights in Education.

**MATILDA RABINOWITZ ROBBINS** emigrated to the U.S. from Ukraine at the age of 13, and after working in a shirtwaist factory became active in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which named her as one of only two IWW women organizers. She arrived in Detroit in 1913, where she was arrested and jailed after giving soapbox speeches to organize Ford Highland Park workers during their lunch break. She also worked as an IWW organizer in the 1913 strike at Studebaker Co., considered the first auto strike in the U.S.

**ANN SHAFER** started work at the Kellogg Company in Battle Creek in 1946, joining Grain Millers Union Local 3, a male-dominated union in a female-dominated industry. She was elected recording secretary, and in 1971 became the first woman to run for president of the local. In 1974, she became one of seven women who formed the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and she remained active in CLUW, the NAACP and the National Organization for Women until her death in 1991.

**MYRA WOLFGANG** was one of the sparkplugs behind the historic 1937 sit-down strike by workers at the Woolworths five-and-dime in downtown Detroit, where for six days more than 100 young women occupied the store until their demands for a raise and better working conditions were met. She went on to become chief executive officer of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Local 705 in Detroit, fighting for a state minimum wage. She was a founder of the Coalition of Labor Union Women and a vice-president of her international union.

*If you have other suggestions for this list, please let us hear from you. Get in touch with us at [michlabor@aol.com](mailto:michlabor@aol.com) or by calling 313-577-4003, or by writing Michigan Labor History Society, 5401 Cass Ave., Detroit MI 48202.*