

Review: Ethel MacDonald

Ethel MacDonald- Glasgow Woman Anarchist. By Rhona M. Hodgart. Pirate Press/ Kate Sharpley Library. £1.30-available from AK Distribution.

Anarchist Communist Federation

1998

Ethel MacDonald was born in Motherwell in 1909, into a large working class family. Politically active from a very early age, she was intensely opposed to the political and economic domination of women. She joined the Independent Labour Party at 16. In 1931 she joined the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (see Organise! 42 for account of the A-PCF). When the A-PCF split in 1934, she left with Guy Aldred to form a new group, the Workers Open Forum. This subsequently merged with a branch of the ILP to form the United Socialist Movement.

In 1936 the USM sent MacDonald to Barcelona with Jenny Patrick, representing the A-PCF, by hitchhiking across France. In Barcelona she became the English speaking propagandist for the Anarchist radio station. As John Taylor Caldwell wrote: "Her Scottish voice was a special attraction, and her broadcasts aroused comment as far afield as the USA". She continued these broadcasts until May 1937 when the Stalinist attack on the Telephone Exchange in Barcelona controlled by members of the Anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT led to street fighting and subsequent repression of the POUM (independent Marxist party) and the Anarchists. Whilst Jenny Patrick returned to Glasgow on May 24, Ethel remained in Spain until November. On June 16th POUM members and foreign activists were rounded up. She visited comrades in prison, smuggling in food and letters. She helped several foreign Anarchists escape from Spain, borrowing clothes for their disguise and getting them on board foreign ships. She was finally captured and imprisoned herself. In prison she helped organise a hunger strike in every prison where there were anarchist prisoners. Released in July 1937 she remained in Barcelona underground until September, when she was deported to France. Back in Scotland, she spoke out consistently against the Stalinist attacks on the POUM and Anarchists, working up to her death in 1960 with Aldred, Patrick, and Caldwell on the USM paper *The Word*. This pamphlet tells her story and in particular her role during the May Days of Barcelona.

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