

Margaret Grace Bondfield was born in 1873 into a large working-class family in Somerset. At 14 she was apprenticed as a shop-worker in Brighton. At 19 she joined the shopworkers' union, becoming its Assistant General Secretary in 1898 –the only woman to occupy such a role in a mixed sex trade union. She was involved in founding the Labour Party in 1900, and in its early women's organisations. She campaigned for universal suffrage rather than being an activist in the female suffrage movement, serving as the President of the Adult Suffrage Society for a time.

She opposed the First World War and was involved in pro-peace international women's organisations. At the same time she worked to get help for unemployed women, for a national minimum wage and for equal pay. She regarded the 1918 Representation of the People Act as 'mean and inadequate' since it failed to enfranchise working-class women. After the War she was elected to the TUC General Council and became its first female chair in 1923.

She stood unsuccessfully for Parliament in 1920, and in the 1923 general election was one of three women elected as the first female Labour MPs. In 1924 she took a junior role in the minority Labour government, possibly having declined a Cabinet post. In the 1924 general election she lost her seat. In 1926 she won a by-election in Wallsend, the seat for which she sat for the remainder of her Parliamentary career.

When Labour came into government following the 1929 election, Margaret Bondfield became Minister of Labour, the first female Cabinet Minister from any party as well as the first female Privy Counsellor.

She was responsible for the government's benefits policy during the economic and financial crisis, attracting criticism for some of her decisions. In 1931 the government fell after Ramsay Macdonald led some Labour MPs into a National Government coalition. Margaret Bondfield chose not to join it and accordingly lost her seat together with many other Labour MPs (including all the women). In 1935 she attempted to return to Parliament but was again defeated.

She returned to the trade union movement, and continued with international work and work on various public health and social issues. Some of her recommendations including around nurseries and the health service formed the basis of parts of the 1945 Labour government's programme. In 1948 she published her autobiography (*A Life's Work*) and died in 1953 aged 80. Clement Atlee gave the oration at her funeral.