

# ***Olga Marie Madar, 80, Pioneer For Women in Automotive Union***

By [Wolfgang Saxon](#)

- May 18, 1996

Olga Marie Madar, who rose to the top echelon in the United Automobile Workers and fought for women's rights in the labor movement, died on Thursday at her home in Detroit. She was 80.

The cause was heart failure, the union said.

Ms. Madar achieved several firsts for women in a union career that spanned 62 years. With pressure from restive female members and the support of Walter P. Reuther, the union's president, she was in 1966 the first woman to take a seat on the union's board.

She was also the first woman to be elected an international vice president of the union, in 1970. And she was the founding national president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in 1974. She retired as an officer of the union in 1974 but remained active in retiree affairs until last year.

She was born in Sykesville, Pa., one of 12 children of a coal miner and grocer who moved the family to Detroit in search of work when she was 15. In 1933, she found a summer job on a Chrysler assembly line.

Years later she recalled that the line moved so fast she could "never keep up" and had nightmares about it. She said she was apparently kept on the job because of her citywide reputation as a terror on the women's softball team.

"There was no union at the plant then," she said, "and the fact that they would hire me when other workers were being laid off -- just because I could play softball -- was incredible. It was my first indication that a union was badly needed."

She remained an advocate for women, aware that women rarely worked more than two or three days a week and were the last hired and first fired. Working summers, she graduated from Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti in 1938 with a degree in physical education.

She reached her first milestone as a unionist in 1947 when she became the director of the recreation department at the auto workers union. She was elected to the policy-setting board at the union convention in 1966.

She joined Reuther in squashing a notion that labor should chart its own political course rather than stick to its alliance with the Democrats. .

Unhappiness among female union members with their lack of power within the unions led to the formation in 1974 of the Coalition of Labor Union Women.

Ms. Madar was also active in civic affairs, working with national organizations with programs to improve parks and recreation centers in the inner cities. She also acted to give citizens access to decision-making in that area.