

History this week

The Leonora Incident of 1939 revisited

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By Tota C Mangar

February, 2010 marks the 71st anniversary of the 1939 Leonora strike and riot. At that point in time, Plantation Leonora on the West Coast Demerara was one of the 27 functioning sugar estates in colonial British Guiana.

During the first half of the 19th century, ownership of Plantation Leonora was in the hands of Mc Inroy, Sandbach and Company. Following the dissolution of that conglomerate in 1854, Plantation Leonora was transferred to Sandbach, Tinne and Company, the London and Liverpool-based parent company of Sandbach Parker and this situation was to persist for sometime. Subsequently in 1891, all of the Sandbach's plantation holdings in Guyana came under the direct control of the Demerara Company.

In addition to Plantation Leonora, the Demerara Company by 1939, also owned and controlled Plantations Diamond, Farm, Providence, Ruimveldt and Cornelia Ida. Of the remaining 21 sugar plantations in the country in the late 1930s, 15 were under the control of Booker Brothers, Mr Connell and Company Limited, while three each were in the hands of Curtis Campbell and S Davson respectively.

The strike and riot of 1939 at Plantation Leonora emerged against the background of the Great Depression of the 1930s which was particularly due to the impact of World War I.

By the 1920s and 1930s, workers' wages were depressingly low in the face of an extremely high cost of living, there was acute poverty, the unemployment rate was high and diseases and malnutrition were rife. It was not surprising, therefore that the Caribbean area, including British Guiana was swept by a wave of unprecedented labour unrests, including strikes and disturbances in the 1930s.

This period of upheaval against social and economic oppression had also witnessed the emergence of several trade unions in the Caribbean and more particularly in British Guiana. The British Guiana Labour Union, our oldest trade union, had by this time emerged under the dynamism and influence of Hubert Nathaniel Critchlow and it had begun to make an impact on the working class. Moreover, it influenced the formation of other trade unions in the country at this crucial period of our history.

In the sugar belt, the Man Power Citizens' Association (MPCA) was formed under the leadership of Ayube Edun, a goldsmith and publisher of the *Guiana Review* newspa-

per, and Mr C R Jacob, a successful merchant and member of the existing Legislative Council. The MPCA was officially registered on November 5, 1937, and it concentrated its energies on organising primarily among workers in the sugar industry. At the same time, the British Guiana Workers League also solicited members within the industry with emphasis on factory and clerical workers.

By 1939, labourers at Plantation Leonora were already known for their militancy. For example, Leonora workers were among the first Indian labourers to resist the indentured system when they rioted as early as August, 1869 against an arbitrary reduction in wage rates. This resistance came about at the height of the indentureship system. Furthermore, in 1909 Leonora workers demonstrated over a wage rate dispute and as recent as 1938 many of them had downed tools over the level of pay for loading punts.

It was against this background of workers' struggle in the sugar industry that the strike and subsequent riot at Plantation Leonora in February, 1939 has to be considered.

The protest in February, 1939 at Leonora has variously been labelled by interest groups and scholars to connote the view in which it was held: as a strike, a riot, a disturbance or even an uprising. Regardless of whatever description is involved one fact is inescapable, that is the protest or unrest possessed almost all the elements one would normally associate with a struggle between the forces of capital and labour, hence, a conflict between two contending classes in society.

Leonora sugar workers, like workers in other sectors of the economy, were prepared to vent their feelings against the acute social and economic hardships they were experiencing. Commenting on the Leonora crisis, the *Daily Argosy* in February, 1939, acknowledged "the general complaint is that earnings are inadequate and not commensurate with the work done."

The first sign of discontent at Plantation Leonora was evidenced on Monday, February 13, 1939, when 10 estate firemen staged a half-day strike, protesting the rather lengthy working day of 11½ hours and requested an extra hour's pay. The firemen were employees retained to stoke the wood-burning furnaces.

Their grievance was lodged with Mr Prentice, the overseer, who promised to refer the matter to Mr Leonard Lywood, the then estate administrative manager. Lywood subsequently deferred taking a decision on the matter in order to consult with the manager of the neighbouring



Pay day circa 1931

Uitvlugt estate. Referring to the issue, the administrative manager himself admitted "that was the first indication we had that trouble was brewing."

A representative group of concerned firemen met Mr Lywood and repeated their demands the next morning, Thursday February 14. They resumed work following a promise by the manager to review the issue. Nonetheless, the protest action by the firemen apparently led other groups on the estate to seek redress for either outstanding or current issues. For example, the same morning, about 80 to 90 members of Shovel Gang No 2 refused an offer of eight and nine cents per bed for work on a field at Groenveldt, some distance from their homes.

A small delegation of these field workers met manager Lywood and demanded 12 cents per bed instead of the original offer. Lywood promised to inspect the field the following day, but he withheld the prospect of upping the pay rate, claiming that he considered nine cents a sufficiently good price. This merely served to infuriate the shovel gang who then conveyed their displeasure to the District Superintendent of Police Mr Webber.

Eventually, a meeting was arranged between Lywood, the District Commissioner of Labour, Mr Gray, and a workers' delegation. But the intervening discussion did very little to resolve the issue. Lywood stuck to the original price offer and Gray openly acknowledged his ineffectiveness at the negotiations.

The workers, for their part, restated their dissatisfaction and requested that MPCA boss, Mr Ayube Edun, be involved in the discussions. This latter request found favour with the Commissioner of Labour but not with the administrative manager of the Leonora Estate.

Perhaps, it is worthwhile to point out that the MPCA, as a union, was still not yet officially recognized by the Sugar Producers Association (SPA) as the bargaining agent for sugar workers. Such a situation undoubtedly contributed to the unrelenting attitude of the estate management. Clearly, an explosive situation was at hand at Plantation Leonora.

With a stalemate in talks in relation to the pay rate, workers took the bold decision to travel to Georgetown to air their grievances before the then visiting West Indian Royal Commission in an apparent belief that the Commissioners would be sympathetic to their cause. According to Dwarka Nath, "they were no doubt influenced by some strong remarks made by Sir Walter Citrine against some employers in the course of evidence given before the Commission."

Meanwhile, industrial action at Leonora escalated on Wednesday, February 15, 1939.

Almost the entire field workforce joined in the strike and took part in picketing exercises on both the sideline' and

'middle walk' dams. While factory workers initially reported for normal duty, the factory was brought to a standstill, as canes were not readily available for processing. The Leonora field workers then embarked on a plan to board the 7.40 am train with their tools of trade and without tickets. They were eventually dissuaded from this aggressive response by a police detachment under Superintendent Webber.

The strikers subsequently proceeded on foot along the railway track to Vreed-en-Hoop, the eastern terminus of the West Coast Demerara railway and the point of embarkation of the Vreed-en-Hoop/Georgetown ferry. At Vreed-en-Hoop, the workers were addressed by C R Jacob who promised them that the MPCA would seek redress for their grievances, which included wage rates, hours of work and method of loading punts. He also advised the strikers to return to their homes. The protesters, however, were not satisfied with the union's response. Instead, they wanted an immediate settlement of their concerns.

C R Jacob for his part departed for Georgetown to attend the afternoon's sitting of the West Indian Royal Commission and it appears as if his visit to Vreed-en-Hoop was largely ineffective. By about 1.30 pm, the gathering of striking workers was joined by another contingent which was conspicuous by the dominance of women. While some were obviously wives of sugar workers, it is reasonable to conclude that a good many of them were sugar workers themselves, as women then formed 30 per cent of field labour and were very pronounced in the weeding gangs.

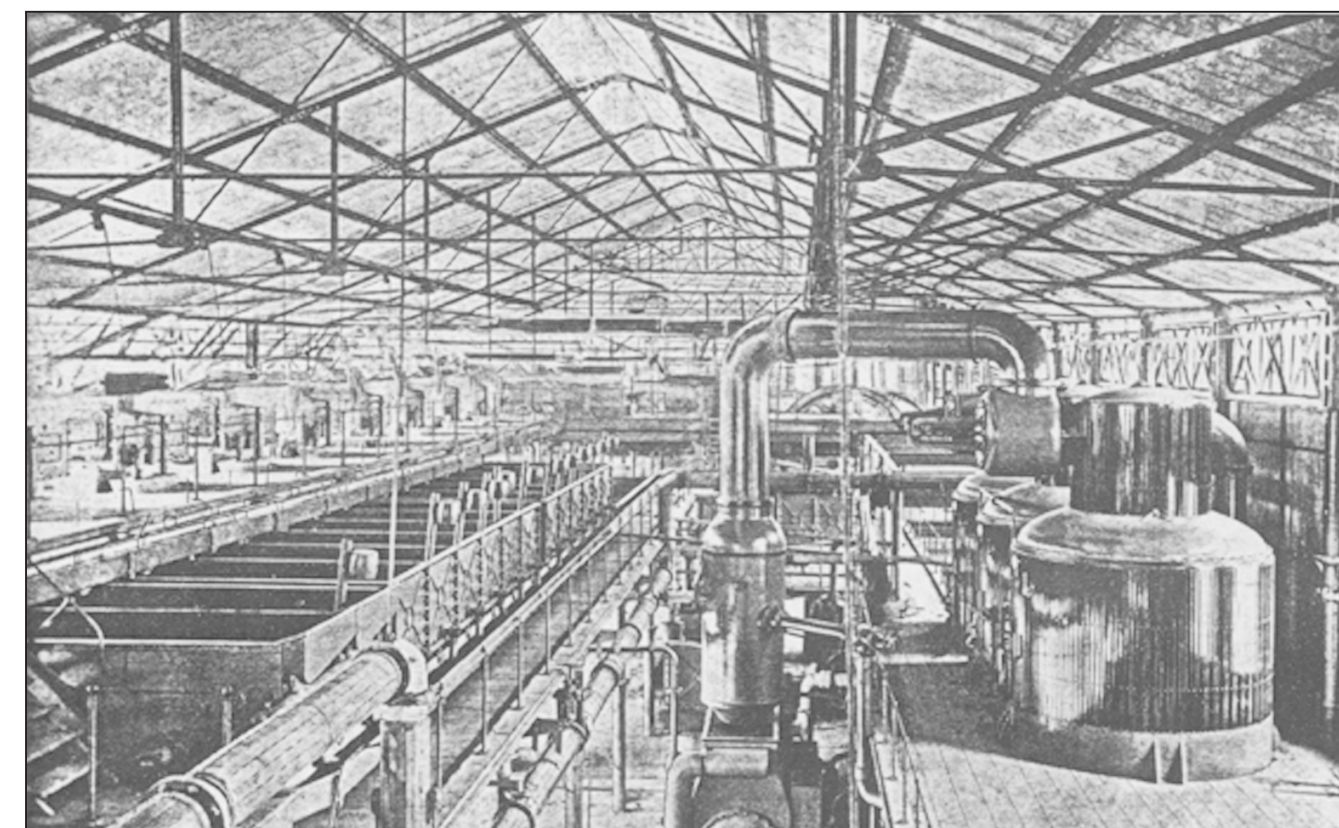
The growing crowd of protesters renewed their efforts to cross to Georgetown, but were prevented from boarding the steamer, *MV Pomeroy* by a party of policemen. While the protesters chanted loudly, they were by no means violent. This fact was highlighted by Mr Jacob before the Royal Commission when he said: "They were discontented but quite peaceful".

By about 4 pm, the situation at the Vreed-en-Hoop terminal had become chaotic. Twice the ferry had to make premature departures and police reinforcements from the city and elsewhere did little to quell the protesters, who intensified their efforts to board the ferry, though police foiled their action.

Some of the strikers then began to board the West Demerara train without tickets, after realizing the difficulty in getting to the capital city. This act of boarding the train without tickets was certainly an act of civil disobedience and such a defiant spirit must have convinced the police, rail and district authorities to accede to the strikers' demand for free transportation home. Additional carriages were attached and following instructions from the



Man from Hope Estate displaying a locally-made, nineteenth-century sarangi which had been handed down to him (photo, 1976)



Interior of a sugar factory circa 1889



Estate manager's house

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