

Women in the sugar industry: The pre-independence period

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order to subsidise their husbands' meagre earnings.

It recommended, among other things, that crèches be provided on each estate and tasks in the field be arranged so as to permit women to return home to prepare meals and look after their children, and also that women and girls should as soon as possible be prevented by ordinance from working in water. Except for the crèches, the recommendations were quite impracticable given, in case of the first, the distance of the fields from the homes of the women and in the second, the very nature of some of the tasks they had to perform, made it well nigh impossible for them not to work in water some of the time.

It is not without irony, however, that women who became best known for their involvement in the sugar industry, did not actually work there in any capacity but came to be recognized for their attempts to organise the sugar workers in the trade union movement which took off after the labour unrest of the 1930s and the recommendations of the Moyne Commission. In this regard,

three women come to mind immediately viz Mrs Janet Jagan, Jane Philips Gay and Philomena Sahoye-Shury.

Dissatisfaction with the quality of representation given to sugar workers by the MPCA led to the establishment of the Guiana Industrial Workers Union with JP Latchmansingh as president and

Jane Philips Gay as general secretary. She served in this position with considerable energy and enthusiasm until the split of the People's Progressive Party into the Jagan and Burnham factions.

She joined the Burnham (later People's National Congress) faction.

A feature that has characterized the evolution of political parties in the Caribbean is the close linkages many had with trade unions. In the case of the three women earlier mentioned, they used the skills and experience they gained as trade unionists to advance their status in politics.

Mrs Jagan certainly honed the skills she was to use in her political career from her involvement in trade union activity. The establishment in 1946 of the Political Affairs Committee which later became the PPP coincided with the Enmore protest which resulted in the death of five sugar workers. Dr and Mrs Jagan were very vocal in their representation of the workers. Mrs Jagan headed the funeral cortege of the martyred workers and played a lead role in commemorating their death anniversary. She also later asked that a pension be given to their families.

Despite the scant recognition in the writings on sugar, women have always made a significant contribution to the survival and development of the industry though not at the decision-making level. This continued to be the case in the post-independence/post-nationalization period. While quantitatively women's participation has not increased significantly in the millennium, qualitatively it certainly has.



Cutting the canes circa 1890

The Leonora Incident of 1939 revisited

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Commissioner of Labour and Local Government, Mr Laing, the train with the striking workers eventually departed for Leonora. Certainly, some of the strikers, if not all, must have viewed this development as a sort of moral victory.

However, the unrest at Leonora worsened on the morning of Thursday, February 16, 1939. Very early on that day, a party of striking workers entered the sugar factory and urged factory workers to support the strike. It would appear that the strike call was heeded as most of the factory workers, including the factory's firemen who had earlier in the week protested, joined in the wider struggle.

With tensions running high, a detachment of policemen, armed with rifles and batons and commanded by the District Superintendent of Police, arrived on the scene. The police presence seemed to have heightened the animosity of the striking workers. Some of them stoned the police bus and they even resisted arrest.

Meanwhile, some strikers congregated near the Administrative Manager's house and again demanded higher pay and

requested the presence of union leaders, Edun and Jacob. Lywood attempted to address the gathering, but was greeted by flying debris. Everything at Leonora was pointing to an explosive situation.

Incidents of sporadic violence increased as the day progressed and the striking workers at Plantation Leonora once again demanded the presence of union officials. This demand was not taken seriously because of the estate administration's refusal to allow the MPCA officials to enter the estate compound in the absence of a union recognition agreement.

The strikers subsequently moved towards the factory. In the meantime, the District Superintendent of Police instructed his men to prevent the entry of strikers into the factory at all costs. The workers continued to advance, while throwing missiles at the police. Constable Bijadder was pursued by a small party of labourers and three policemen went to his rescue. Blows were exchanged between striking workers and policemen and injuries were sustained by both groups.

As the strikers became more and more threatening, orders were made to open fire on the ringleaders. The colonial

police obeyed and four strikers, including a woman, were killed, while four others were seriously injured. The crowd quickly dispersed, as people ran helter-skelter and the strikers were subdued. By the following day, the strike was over and work eventually resumed at Plantation Leonora.

As to the incident, the *Daily Argosy* of Friday, February 17, had as its headline, 'Bloodshed at Leonora. Police compelled to fire on mob'. Governor Wilfred Jackson promptly appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the circumstances relating to the Leonora disturbances of 1939.

The Commission of Inquiry comprised Chairman Justice Verity, First Puisne Judge Mr J A Luckhoo and Mr Arthur Hill, retired Immigration Agent General. According to Justice Verity, the Commission of Inquiry "should be conducted thoroughly but with expedition and we rely on every person concerned to support us in our determination to do so".

After 12 days of intense hearing, involving the Police Department, the Demerara Company Limited, the relatives of the deceased through the British Guiana East Indian Association, and a

total of 69 witnesses, the Commission laid blame on the Sugar Producers Association for its failure to grant recognition to the MPCA. At the same time, it did not think the existing conditions at plantation Leonora justified the level of discontent of the workers.

The Leonora Strike of 1939 in the end undoubtedly helped to hasten the recognition issue surrounding the MPCA, even though sugar workers were to be disenchanted with this very move in a few years' time. This was evidenced in the late 1940s when they broke away in favour of the Guiana Industrial Workers Union, the forerunner of the Guyana Agricultural and General Workers Union, with its more radical and militant leadership.

The protest action was also significant from the point of view that it witnessed prominent roles by women and the unified action of Guyanese field and factory workers, especially in the latter stages of the strike.

The 1939 protest at Plantation Leonora was indeed part of a wider and ongoing working class struggle in this pre-independence period of Guyana's history.