

Kowsilla - A brave woman who gave her life in the freedom struggles

by Janet Jagan

A child, on reading the Children's Stories of Guyana's Freedom Struggles said: "Weren't there any women in the freedom struggles?" Of course, there were, very many, in fact. Here is the story of one woman who gave her life in the struggle for freedom.

Her name was Kowsilla, but she was sometimes called Alice. She lived in Leonora, a sugar estate on the West Coast of Demerara. Her mother worked in the weeding gang and her father was a butler, a domestic worker for the manager. Because her mother and father worked, Kowsilla, the eldest child, had to take care of her eight sisters and two brothers when they were little. Her mother and father worked long hours for little pay, so Kowsilla had to shoulder the responsibilities of running the house and caring for her brothers and sisters. However, she loved school and tried very hard to get an education. She succeeded in completing her primary education, but never had the opportunity to go to secondary school, as she had so desired.

Kowsilla began to work with the weeding gang at Leonora estate when she was only 17 years of age. She felt strongly that the workers were being exploited; they did not receive enough pay for the work they were doing. Although she was a very quiet person, she was so concerned about the oppression she and her fellow workers were enduring, that she joined the sugar workers' union, Guyana Agricultural Workers Union



(GAWU) and became an active member. She also joined a woman's organisation, the Women's Progressive Organisation (WPO), which fought for women's rights. She became a good organizer.

It was in the year 1964 that the combination of forces bent on removing Dr Cheddi Jagan's government from office, became even more active and more violent. The American Central Intelligence Agency, in co-operation with British Secret agents and the Guyanese collaborators (which included the People's National Congress, the United Force and the Trades Union Congress) were engaged in activities which brought much pain and sorrow to Guyanese. It was a year of burning, looting, murders, bombings, fear and tension.

Sugar workers were on strike against the British owners of the estates and were calling for union recognition and better conditions of work and pay. Their children were suffering and the parents were very concerned.

On March 6 1964, at Plantation Leonora, where Kowsilla worked, the strike was in full swing. The workers were told that if they failed to return to work within 72 hours, they would be fired. Scabs, a word to

describe people who go to work when a strike is on, were encouraged to break the strike. Workers were guarding several points at which the scabs were entering the fields. At a key bridge, women workers were in charge and their task was to prevent scabs from entering Leonora. They squatted in front of the bridge.

Along came an estate tractor driven by a scab. The women stood fast, with their slogan, 'they shall not pass.' The tractor moved forward to cross the bridge, smashing through the women stalwarts, killing Kowsilla on the spot and injuring 14 others. Everyone was in sorrow, but she inspired the people to continue the struggle. Kowsilla left behind two sons and two daughters.

Since then, her union, GAWU, and her women's organisation, WPO, each year go to her simple grave to cover it with flowers and to honour this brave woman who gave her life in the freedom struggle.

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