

Assam move boosts Bengal tea pay demand

OUR BUREAU

Siliguri/Alipurduar: A proposal mooted by a board in Assam to fix the minimum wage of tea garden workers at Rs 351 has come as a boost for trade unions in Bengal which also demand a similar pay structure in the sector.

The Bengal government, too, had formed a board to recommend the minimum wage for tea plantation workers in the state. The Bengal board comprises stakeholders of the tea industry and officials of the labour department and is yet to come up with any proposal.

“On Monday, there will be a meeting of the advisory board on minimum wage in Calcutta. At the meeting, we will insist that the board finalise a rate and recommend it to the state government. Three years have passed since the board has been formed and yet, no decision has been taken. We have made certain proposals at the board’s meetings but it has not taken any move,” said Gopal Prodhan, the president of the Dooars Cha Bagan Worker’s Union, affiliated to the RSP.

Political observers said the Assam proposal has posed a fresh challenge for Trinamul and the state government.

“Assam is ruled by the BJP which is trying to make a foray into the tea garden belt of Bengal. The BJP will highlight the

Morcha to halt tea pluck

VIVEK CHHETRI

Darjeeling: The Gorkha Janmukti Morcha-affiliated trade union for tea estate workers has decided to stop plucking of lucrative first flush tea leaves in the Darjeeling hills from Monday to protest the planters' failure to clear workers' bonus.

Bharat Thakuri, the general secretary of the Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union, on Sunday said: "We had asked the management of respective tea gardens to clear last year's bonus by March 10 but only 14 of 87 hill estates have cleared the dues. We have, therefore, decided to stop plucking of green leaves in the hill gardens from Monday."

The 87 gardens producing Darjeeling Tea had agreed to pay bonus at 19.75 per cent of the worker's earning of the 2016-17 financial year.

The bonus is usually cleared before Puja but most gardens have only cleared 50 per cent of the amounts because of resumption of the Gorkhaland movement last year.

The Morcha union has already enforced a ban on dispatch of made tea from the gardens. If green leaves are not plucked, there is every possibility of the crop getting damaged and the quality deterior-

tion has started in gardens at lower elevations but the peak season would begin from the third week of March and continue for around 45 days.

Sandeep Mukherjee, the principal advisor to the Darjeeling Tea Association (DTA), said: "No management in senses would want to disturb the first flush. The management is not asking for any compensation and we are duty bound to pay the agreed amounts. We are only asking for some time as the industry is facing a se-



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vere economic crisis."

The first flush tea commands the highest price and most of the commodity is exported. The Darjeeling tea industry has four flushes, first, second, monsoon and autumn. The first flush starts from March and goes till mid-April, followed by the other flushes.