

Tea garden gripe brews

Union writes to govt on estate closures, wage woes



THORNS IN THE BUSHES

Alipurduar: A senior Trinamul based in Alipurduar who also heads the tea trade union of the party has sent a letter to state labour minister Moloy Ghatak and will soon write to the chief minister expressing disappointment over the activities of a section of planters and tea companies which own gardens in north Bengal.

"Some tea planters having tea gardens here are not bothered about the interests of tea workers. They act at their own whims and often close down or abandon the gardens, without considering the fact that such decisions leave hundreds of workers jobless. That is why I have written to the state labour minister and will soon write to the chief minister, seeking their intervention," said Mohan Sharma, the Alipurduar district Trinamul president.

In recent times, it is a rare incident that leader of the trade union backed by the ruling party of the state has sought intervention of the government on an issue of tea industry.

"This is because we want an end of this trend. There are some tea companies like the Duncans Goenka which are acting in an unpredictable manner. They have abandoned a garden within 90 days of its reopening. Such moves are sending a wrong message to the workers and their families," added Sharma, who is also the president of Cha Bagan Trinamul Mazdoor Union.

The move by Sharma, party insiders said, is to prevent BJP from taking any advantage out of the issue.

The Duncans Goenka Group had abandoned its estates in 2014. Ahead of the Assembly polls of 2016, BJP leaders had promised to reopen the gardens and it worked for party as it could win the Madarihat Assembly seat, where seven tea gardens of the group are located.

This made Trinamul take the task to garner support base. Sharma and some other party leaders took initiative and with the state's intervention, managed to facilitate reopening of four of the seven gardens, including Demdima, the garden that has been recently abandoned by the group again.

"Reopening of these gardens helped Trinamul to perform better in the Birpara-Madarihat block at the panchayat elections. However, after the management left Demdima, BJP leaders turned vocal on the issue and started saying that the entire process was an eyewash by Trinamul to garner votes. The BJP will again make it an issue at the Parliament polls scheduled next year," said an observer.

In the letter, Sharma has mentioned that prior to change of ownership, it is necessary to have consent of the workers. In many cases, the old owner walked out without paying the workers' dues and the new owner asserts that he is not ready to take old liabilities.

It is only recently that the Supreme Court acted on a petition filed by trade unions and ordered that the state governments of some of the tea-producing states should clear a portion of the old dues of tea workers.

"The chief minister has time and again expressed her concern for the industry. I will elaborate on these issues in the letter and would request her to take necessary steps. The state should see that tea companies clear the workers' dues," said Sharma.

Calls to a representative of Duncan Goenka Group went unanswered. Some clerical staff posted in the gardens of the group said they have no information as when the closed gardens would reopen or the workers' dues would be cleared.

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