

Tea garden strike for minimum wages

BIRESWAR BANERJEE

Siliguri: The Joint Forum, an apex body of tea unions in north Bengal that does not include Trinamul-backed groups, has called a three-day strike in the region's gardens next month to press for minimum wages.

The announcement has worried planters who fear huge losses as July, one of the monsoon months, is peak production time.

"We have decided to observe a three-day strike in tea gardens at the plains of north Bengal from July 23 to July 25.

On July 25, we would also appeal to residents of the tea producing areas to observe a 12-hour general strike. This is because the state is delaying in fixing and implementing the minimum wage rate for tea workers," said Ziaur Alam, convener, Joint Forum.

For the union leaders of Trinamul, the strike is a challenge as they will have to decide whether to join the strike.

The forum has kept the hill gardens out of the purview of strike, which has created some breathing space for some of the planters. Last year, the hill tea gardens had suffered

huge losses and production had almost stopped due to the 104-day-long agitation and shutdown.

The forum had observed a similar two-day strike in the tea belt on June 12 and June 13 last year, immediately before the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha had announced its indefinite strike over the demand of separate statehood.

"In the hills, there will be protests and demonstrations in tea gardens over the same demand. However, there will not be any strike," Alam added.

Ahead of the strike, there

will be a series of activities, starting from July 2.

"On July 9, notices of the strike would be served at different quarters and from July 10 to July 20 citizens' conventions would be held in multiple locations. People would be apprised over the demands of tea workers and the problems they are facing due to non-implementation of minimum wage," said a trade union leader.

For the general strike, the Forum will approach to residents living in Mekhliganj, Islampur and Siliguri sub-divisions (of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri

and Darjeeling districts) those in Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts.

Members of planters' fraternity sounded perturbed over the decision.

"Production reaches its peak during the monsoon months and a sudden halt in activities means huge losses. We feel the trade union leaders will realise the situation and will give a second thought to their decision," said S. Guhathakurta, secretary, Dooars Branch of Indian Tea Association.

In July last year, 28.14 million kilos of tea was produced

in the Dooars (12.70 per cent of annual production) while in Terai, production on the month was 19.88 million kilos (12.19 per cent).

For Trinamul, it is a catch-22 situation, opined observers. Trinamul backed unions dodged a direct reply when asked about their stand. "We will have a meeting on Saturday to discuss on the issue. There, we will make a decision and plan our further course of action," said Mohan Sharma, chairman, Cha Bagan Trinamul Congress Mazdoor Union.

Additional reporting by Anirban

Choudhury in Alipurduar