

# Planter plea to lift tea strike

## OUR CORRESPONDENT

**Alipurduar:** Tea planters in the Terai and the Dooars have appealed to trade unions to refrain from agitation programmes starting from Monday as July contributes to the bulk of monsoon production.

The Joint Forum — a conglomeration of 24 trade unions — and the Cha Bagan Trinamul Congress Mazdoor Union had announced the agitation programmes to demand minimum wages in the tea industry.

The forum will organise gate meetings in tea gardens from July 2 to 4, while the Triamul union has declared gate meetings from July 6 to 10.

The forum has also called an industry-wide strike on July 23 and 24 and a general strike in the tea belt of north Bengal on July 25.

Ram Avtar Sharma, the general secretary of the Dooars Branch of the Tea Association of India, said the agitation would have a negative impact on the quality of tea.

"The market is quality conscious. We appeal to trade unions to refrain from the agitation particularly during the current peak season. Representatives of every trade union is on the Minimum Wage Committee where they can express their views. The minimum wage issue should be resolved through discussions, instead of agitation," said Sharma.

The Bengal government had formed the committee to discuss the demand to fix minimum wages in the tea sector with representatives of trade unions and planters' associations.

The tea planters have said July is an important month as the bulk of the "monsoon" plucking takes place around this time.

"Gate meetings are called for one hour in the morning every day but in reality, workers join duties after almost two hours. Still, we have to pay full wages. Three will be three days of strike at the end of July and the production will be hit badly. The weather is favourable now and if one round of monsoon plucking is hampered, then the quality of tea

will deteriorate. Three more rounds of plucking will be affected. At present, good quality tea has high price and bad brew has no takers," said the planter.

He said the daily wage of a worker in Bengal was Rs 29 higher than the pay in Assam.

"The Minimum Wage Committee will submit its report and the government will take a final decision. Planters have nothing to do with the minimum wage demand but they will suffer because of the agitation. If the agitation is not withdrawn, the tea industry will be in big trouble. If the monsoon production is hampered, the loss will affect the bonus payment also," added the tea estate owner.