

RUN GARDEN OR LEAVE MAMATA WARNS TEA INC

Siliguri/Kolkata: Iterating her last year's stance, chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday threatened to block assets of tea producers and cancel their land leases if they fail to run the estates properly.

Banerjee also said that the government will pitch for a minimum daily wage Rs 176 for the garden workers at the soon-to-be-held meeting with the industry stakeholders.

“I am warning the tea industry again. They should pay the workers' wage, PF, bonuses and provide other facilities on time. Very soon, a meeting with the producers will be convened and they will be requested to accept the minimum prescribed wage of Rs 176 a day for the ailing workers,” she said at the administrative meeting at the north Bengal Secretariat, Uttarkanya, in Siliguri on Thursday.

The tea belt in north Bengal, which has been going through a rough phase for the last few weeks amid closure of a few gardens, gate meetings of workers and a three-day strike call (July 23-25) demanding rise in daily wage, has caught the CM's attention at the meet. Banerjee, however, did not say anything about the strike call by the Dooars-Terai garden workers. Labour minister Malay Ghatak, state government officials, INTTUC, GJM, Akhil Bharatiya Adibasi Bikas Parishad, were among others present at the CM's meet in Siliguri.

Earlier this year, following a tripartite meeting with unions and producers, an interim hike Rs 9 was granted to the tea workers, raising their wage to Rs 159 in the state.

Azam Monem, chairman, Indian Tea Association (ITA), said: “We have agreed to all the decisions and directives on payment of minimum wage and bonuses at all the government-level tripartite meetings. We are keeping in touch with the labour minister in this regard.”

The producers, however, rued about their own problems. According to them, banks have tightened their lending norms, resulting on paucity of funds, and cash realization from tea sales has gone negative. “The market is down. So, we need to look at ways to get a retail and auction price push. We have to be responsible to produce quality tea keeping the cost under check,” added Monem.

Some industry stalwarts cited the rise of small tea growers' (STG) as a deterrent factor. Atul Asthana, the MD & CEO of Goodricke, told TOI: “STGs, which

produce around 45% of the total tea output of the state, are getting away without adhering to the Plantation and Labour Act 1951 norms. Hence, the poor price realisation.” Oversupply of tea leaves is taking the price to a new low every day, he claimed. Some industry veterans also pleaded the government to desist allotting fresh land for tea plantation to stop further oversupply of leaves.

Sumanto Guha Thakurata, secretary of ITA Dooars Branch, said the issue would be discussed in details at the state capital tomorrow.

The CM also formed a new committee, led by the chief secretary Malay De, to prepare a detailed report on the eight lakh people, excluding the 2.76 lakh permanent garden workers, who live in the tea belt. “The committee will come up with ways such as skill development and home tourism in order to generate livelihood for this segment in three months’ time. It will also work for distributing pattas of the erstwhile lease-hold land to tea workers, required for availing benefits of Central schemes like NREGS or Ujala Yojna,” she said.

On the seven closed gardens of Duncans in Dooars, the CM gave an ultimatum to the Centre. “Either you (the Centre) take care of them or revoke the order and leave it to us,” she asserted.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/run-gardens-or-leave-mamata-warns-tea-inc/articleshow/64968092.cms>