

Govt brews plan for tea families

Mamata forms panel for welfare of workers' dependants, relatives



Siliguri: Mamata Banerjee on Thursday addressed issues pertaining to the families of workers in the tea estates of north Bengal.

At a meeting of the tea advisory council of the state held here in Uttarkanya, Mamata decided to form a high-level committee led by chief secretary Malay Kumar De to delve into the problems of "non-workers".

The term is used to describe family members or relatives of tea workers who form the bulk of the population in the estates.

The panel has been asked to prepare a report in three months and suggest permanent solutions to such problems.

"In tea gardens, there are 2.72 lakh workers but simultaneously, there are eight lakh non-workers. We have decided to form the committee so that a permanent solution can be drawn about their problems. Our government plans to provide vocational training for skill development to non-workers and help them in case they want to come up with self-employment projects like poultry or want to develop a tourism facility in the area," Mamata said.

She also mentioned that the state would also look into the issue of land rights, a longstanding demand of the tea population. "The population is on the rise in tea estates and most are non-workers.....the land however, is limited in a tea garden... we have to work on a plan."

The decision to address the problems of non-workers is a calculated move that can largely help Trinamul to consolidate its support base in the tea belts of the region, observers.

So far, the state has worked on wages of tea workers and has extended some social schemes in the tea belt, including distribution of rice at cheaper rates. This is the first time the Trinamul government has specifically examined the problems of non-workers.

"Non-workers form around 80 per cent of the population in tea gardens. Unlike earlier years, the entire population does not feel satisfied if there is a revision of wages as employment opportunities in the tea industry have virtually dried up and daily earnings are higher in most other sectors," said an observer.

Also, the committee has been formed within 10 days after the Tea Board of India announced formation of a 12-member group comprising tea planters and representatives of different associations related to the industry, to work for rejuvenation of the sector and to look into the problems of different stakeholders.

"It is interesting that on one hand, the BJP government at the Centre formed the group to prove its sincerity in resolving issues of tea industry. The move is being seen as an attempt to garner support to win the parliamentary seats in the tea belts," added the observer.

Mamata, while speaking at the news conference, was critical of the Joint Forum, an apex body of tea trade unions that has called a three-day tea industry strike later this month. "Tea industry is already facing several problems....such strikes only add to its burdens. Those who have called the strike are doing so for political intentions. We do not support it," she said.

Labour minister Moloy Ghatak, present with the chief minister, said they have proposed a revised daily rate of Rs 176 for tea workers who receive Rs 159 (including the cash component of ration). "Discussions are on to fix minimum wages," he said.

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