

UNABLE TO INCREASE TEA WAGES: PLANTERS

Siliguri: Tea planters have expressed their inability to accept two back-to-back interim wage hikes proposed by the Bengal government on Thursday, citing losses and the additional expenditure.

State labour minister Moloy Ghatak had mooted the proposal at a meeting here, pushing for a raise of Rs 10 and Rs 7 over the existing daily wage rate of Rs 159 from September and October. This will increase the wage to Rs 176.

The proposal was rejected by Joint Forum, an umbrella body of non-Trinamul tea unions.

"As the forum has rejected the proposal of a further interim hike (another hike of Rs 17.50 was made in March this year) and is insisting on (fixing the) minimum wage, it is already a problem for the state. In fact, none from the forum was present at the meeting (on Thursday). It is unlikely that the state can enforce the revised interim rate from next month," said an observer.

Ghatak had hinted that the proposed interim hikes could be implemented if an August 20 meeting in Calcutta on minimum wages failed to arrive at a consensus.

"The tea industry in Bengal continues to reel under a financial crisis arising out of stagnant prices. It is incapable of bearing this burden," said Prabir Bhattacharjee, secretary-general of the Tea Association of India. He pointed that the average annual growth in tea prices over the past five years was only 1.15 per cent.

Some felt the state and the ruling Trinamul were trying to keep tea workers happy ahead of the parliamentary elections next year.

"In BJP-ruled Assam, the daily wage rate was Rs 137, which will increase to Rs 167 after an interim hike proposed in that state. Bengal wants to increase the rate to Rs 176," said an observer.

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