

Trinamul, BJP govts look to fix wage, gain poll edge

Bengal, Assam in tea race

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Siliguri/Darjeeling: Bengal and Assam appear locked in a race on minimum tea wages, with the Trinamul and the BJP governments aiming to steal the march in fixing the rate and gaining an edge in next year's general elections.

Neither state has a minimum wage for tea workers now. Assam has Lok Sabha seven seats where tea workers can sway outcomes while Bengal has three.

Tea workers get Rs 159 per day in Bengal and Rs 137 in Assam, which has recently proposed an interim hike of Rs 30, which will increase the pay to Rs 167.

"In Assam, the state government has proposed a minimum wage rate of Rs 351.33 and officials are in consultation with tea planters' associations. This move prompted the Bengal government to propose a minimum wage rate of Rs 172. Both states are desperately trying to resolve the issue because if Assam fixes it before, BJP will make it an issue



A woman walks through Dagapur tea estate, that is near Siliguri on Wednesday.
Picture by Passang Yolmo

here. On the other hand, if Bengal does it, Trinamul will not lose any time but would start campaigning and would draw comparisons with the BJP government of Assam to consolidate its support base in the north Bengal tea belt," said a senior trade union leader.

However, for Trinamul, a hurdle to an early settlement is presence of Joint Forum – an apex body of 24 non-Trinamul trade unions, and its insistence for a higher wage rate.

On Monday, as the state labour commissioner proposed the rate of Rs 172, the

Forum rejected it and came up with a proposal of Rs 239.

Leaders of its constituent unions, including the unions backed by BJP, Congress and the Left, claimed that talks should continue and as their demand was not met, they called a three-day strike in the Terai and Dooars and also announced that teas would not be dispatched from the hill gardens during these days.

Even Bimal Gurung came up with a release, backing the demand of the Forum and has criticised the state for proposing a lower rate than the rate proposed in Assam.

Following the call of strike, Trinamul leaders in the plains and the Binay Tamang led Gorkha Jannukti Morcha in hills, took the task to put their best efforts to keep things normal in the gardens.

"We believe that all issues can be resolved through a dialogue. The state has mooted a proposal and another meeting has been called in Calcutta on August 20 for further talks. We do not want to stop dispatches or launch agitation in the hill gardens during these

three days as the industry had suffered losses during the strike last year. The issue can be resolved through dialogues," said Karuna Gurung, president, of the Morcha-backed Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union.

In the plains, leaders of Trinamul-backed tea unions were critical at the Forum and urged its supporters to join their duties.

"Some people are trying to play politics in the garb of union activities. If any garden closes down due to such disruptive activities like strikes, the unions and their parties have to take the responsibility," said Prabhat Mukherjee, vice-president, Cha Bagan Trinamul Congress Mazdoor Union.

Trinamul wants to show that the Joint Forum is not the last word. "Similarly, the Morcha in the hills wanted to prove that it is the predominant entity and that trade unions of GNLF or other constituents of the Joint Forum are not forces to be reckoned with," said an observer.