

India : The United Tea Workers Front (UTWF) launched to break a viscous circle of poverty

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The United Tea Workers Front(UTWF) has been launched on 27th December 2013 at Siliguri, primarily to raise the issue of a living wages and related matters in the forthcoming wage negotiations in North Bengal.

The tea industry, one of the most profitable, export earning sectors in India, is also the site of the worst labour conditions in the country. With over 3500 starvation deaths in the period 2003 to 2008 in West Bengal, tea plantation workers continue to be one of the lowest paid workers in the country, with owners reaping profits at the expense of the basic needs of nutrition, health education and housing of the workers and their families. As a result of ill payment, plantation workers have been caught in a viscous circle of poverty, poor literacy and ill health, with children of tea workers ending up in the same ill paid work as their parents and grandparents before them.

In West Bengal, wages have been kept at a precariously low level through collective wage bargaining agreements every three years. The last set of agreements, which resulted in the low wage of Rs.95 in Terai and Doars, and Rs.90 in Darjeeling, expires on 31st March 2014. The tea gardens have been violating the basic provisions of the Plantation Labour Act with impunity. Provisions of crèche, medical facilities, ambulance, and house repair have all become things of the past. Moreover, many tea gardens of the region have also not deposited the provident fund dues of the workers amounting to over Rs.77 crores while the state government has provided full support to the garden owners by being a silent onlooker.

Calculations based on 15th Indian Labour Conference (ILC) norms and the subsequent Supreme Court judgments (Unichoy vs State of Kerala in 1961 and Reptakos Brett Vs Workmen case in 1991) provide for a balanced diet with 2700 calories per day per person and other material needs, giving workers a living wage. Using these norms, the wage per worker in the tea-gardens at current market prices should be Rs 322.

The UTWF plans to campaign and raise demands related to the payment of such a living wage before and during the next round of negotiations. The Front demands the payment of a wage that is over and above the

wage calculated on the 15th ILC norms and Supreme Court orders. It insists that all wage negotiations must take place at Darjeeling for the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and in Siliguri for the Terai and Doars regions, so that negotiations are transparent and democratic, allowing the unions to consult their membership in a regular and realistic manner. Employers and Government must also be transparent about the manner in which calculations and deductions are being made, providing unions with all relevant documents well in time.

UTWF also demands that negotiations must be completed by 1st April 2014, so that the problem of arrears does not arise at all. All payments such as extra leaf payment (ELP), Leave Travel allowance , additional compensation etc. must be price indexed and workers must be paid dearness allowance to compensate for inflation during the term of the next collective bargaining agreement for 2014 to 2017.

As far as bigha workers are concerned , the UTWF demands the extension of all wage and non wage benefits to such seasonal, casual workers. Further, the UTWF demands that all vacant posts be filled immediately, and that management arrange for trainings so that workers can take on posts requiring special skills such as nursing, factory work etc. In view of the manner in which employers and management continue to flout the law, the UTWF demands that punishment under the law for erring employers be made more stringent and inspection be improved.

The UTWF brings together the Terai Dooars Progressive Plantation Workers Union, Darjeeling Terai Doars Plantation Labour Union, Progressive Tea Workers Union, West Bengal Tea Labour Union, Pachim Banga Khet Majoor Samity and the New Trade Union Initiative.

The UTWF shall be launching a series of protest and campaign programmes, including deputations to all officials concerned in North Bengal, GTA and Kolkata and demonstrations in all block and district headquarters , GTA headquarters and the State capital at Kolkata. It also plans to highlight its problems before an internationally acclaimed jury in February 2014.

The UTWF also calls upon all other fraternal unions of tea plantation workers and in other sectors for a coordination to make the collective bargaining agreement of 2014 to 2017 reflect the true aspirations of tea plantation workers.

Below are the links for the press coverage

<http://bartamanpatrika.com/content/nb.htm>

http://www.uttarbangasambad.com/page3.php?p_no=3
