

Statement of United Tea Workers' Front after the total strike in West Bengal (India)

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Workers in all the tea gardens of Terai, Dooars and Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal observed a total strike on November 11th & 12th, 2014 bringing the industry to a halt. The strike was called by a joint forum of 23 trade unions demanding minimum wages of tea garden workers who still get paid a paltry wage of Rs 90 to Rs 95 per day.

United Tea Workers Front (UTWF) congratulates all workers across Darjeeling, Dooars & Terai for the complete success of this strike. UTWF feels that the resolute unity shown by almost all trade unions in the midst of adversities is also exemplary.

The strike shows that the struggle for decent living wages of the tea plantation workers has entered a new phase. It has received wide support from the people of North Bengal, as is evident from their participation in the general strike. The abysmally low wages of tea workers have also been condemned by many other sections of the public in Bengal. On the other hand the State Government is in a state of inertia. It had called one meeting of all trade unions on the 5th of November 2014, and is calling another on the 17th of November 2014. Unless it has something fresh to propose as action by or against the owners and unless it takes steps to declare minimum wages, such meetings seems futile.

Even though tea plantation workers continue to be one of the lowest paid workers in the country, with owners reaping profits at their expense, the plantation owners are stubborn towards any proposal to ensure decent living conditions for the workers in the industry. The current wage negotiations for the period April 2014 - March 2017 has virtually collapsed since the owners refuse to agree to any respectable settlement for the workers. UTWF condemns the obstinacy of the tea plantation owners led by their apex body, Consultative Committee of Plantation Associations (CCPA) which has almost closed all doors for any meaningful dialogue for the solution of the miserable conditions in which workers find themselves. The miserable wages in the sector binds workers to a vicious 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.

UTWF notes that the role of the government has been inadequate and therefore, unsatisfactory. Instead of pro-actively forcing the plantation owners to ensure living wages for the workers it has almost been silent on this issue. It has even failed to come out with a mere notification for the workers of the tea industry and has only proposed meager increases of Rs 40 in three years. Rather than confronting errant owners for their failure to guarantee the basic needs of nutrition, health, education and housing of the workers and their families, as required under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951 it has nearly let them off the hook by acting passive.

We would urge the State Government to take pro-active steps to end the impasse in the tea sector before things spin out of control. We demand that they immediately start the process of declaration of minimum wages in the tea sector, while at the same time taking action against errant and inhuman employers. One thing is for sure, the workers in this sector and the public in general will not silently tolerate the injustice meted out for ages.

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