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Indian Tea Workers

Workers Have Been Cheated Once Again!

- News from around the world -

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Reject the Black Agreement! Join hands in the struggle for Minimum Wages!

Progressive Plantation Workers Union (PPWU) expresses its utter disgust at the tripartite agreement on wages in the tea industry signed on 20.2.2015. After over one year of struggle and eight tripartite sittings, it was an anti-climax to find most unions, employers and the State Government once again signing an agreement to provide starvation wages to tea plantation workers.

The agreement yesterday has provided a raise of Rs.37.50 over three years to tea plantation workers in Terai and Doars and Rs.42.50 to workers in Darjeeling. Workers will therefore be paid a miserly amount of Rs. 112 .50 in the first year, Rs.122.50 in the second year and finally Rs. 132.50 in the third year.

By no logic can such an increase be justified. Firstly it comes nowhere near the repeatedly articulated demand by the workers for minimum wages. It is nowhere near their demand for a wage of Rs.322 per day calculated on the basis of well accepted minimum wage norms and Supreme Court orders. Nor does it even make tea plantation workers at par with wages in other sectors. The State Government declared minimum wage for the poorest sector, the agricultural sector, is Rs.206 at present and likely to increase further in the next three years with revisions twice a year to compensate for inflation. The gap between tea industry wages and wages in other sectors is therefore likely to widen further, leading to high absenteeism in the industry.

Wages as low as this are also likely to worsen conditions of poverty and malnutrition amongst tea plantation workers. We are thus likely to continue to get shameful reports of starvation deaths in an industry that is a huge export earner and has a flourishing and ever expanding domestic market.

The meagre wage increase is especially disappointing because there was a much trumpeted effort by all unions to present a united front in the last 6-9 months by the formation of the Joint Forum and by many united actions. This had enthused workers and they had also presented a united front to all employers in all gardens. In an industry that was fragmented by multiple unions, this was a move that was unprecedented and it led to hopes of a decent raise in wages. Here also, the unions have failed their rank and file and have signed an agreement that brings peanuts after all the struggle and efforts to highlight the demand for minimum wages that preceded this agreement. This leads one to wonder whether the major unions and players in this exercise were serious in their efforts at a movement or were just playing a game.

As a face saver, the agreement has also put down in writing that the agreement will remain in force till a State Government formed committee formed on 17.2.2015 puts forward its proposal on minimum wages under the Minimum Wages Act 1948. However, no deadline has been given for this committee and it has been asked to submit its report "as early as possible". The committee of 24 persons has eight Government representatives, eight employer representatives, and three members from ruling party controlled unions. From past experience in the tea sector, we could well say that that the report may not at all be submitted till 2017, if it is ever submitted.

The imposition of the agreement reveals that the government's initiatives towards implementing minimum wages in the industry are nothing more than mere tokenism. Instead of forcing this agreement on the workers, they could have stipulated the committee a deadline to submit its recommendations soon. A decent arrearage could have been worked out for the period till the workers receive minimum wages.

PPWU reiterates its rejection of the agreement. Our representatives have not signed the same and we affirm that we will continue our struggle for a just and fair wage in the tea sector. We appeal workers to reject this black agreement

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and join us in the struggle for a minimum wage in this sector. We also demand that the committee set by the government submit its recommendations within three months!

[PPWU](#)