

Tea union panels to help secure arrears



Alipurduar: Representatives of one of the trade unions that had filed a writ petition at the Supreme Court over the issue of old dues of tea workers announced formation of a five-member committee in each of the 29 tea estates of Dooars to ensure that all such workers receive a portion of their dues from the state.

The payments are to start from Monday.

On Sunday, the Paschimbanga Khet Mazdoor Samiti (PBKMS), held a workers' convention at the Demdima tea estate ground in Birpara of Alipurduar district. Around 1,200 workers from different tea estates participated at the meet.

The PBKMS, along with the International Union for Food Workers and another trade union, had filed the petition at the apex court. The Supreme Court, after hearing the case, had ordered that the state governments of concerned tea-producing states will have to pay a portion of these dues.

In Bengal, the state will have to distribute around Rs 15 crore among 34,000 workers of 29 tea estates. The total due however, is Rs 135 crore, which the tea companies concerned will have to pay to the workers or their dependants.

"We have asked the workers who will receive the dues not to pay money to any person assuring prompt payment, not to sign on blank forms and also do not succumb under any pressure. We have formed a five-member committee in each of these gardens who will help the workers to finish all the formalities and get the money," said Anuradha Talwar, a state committee member of PBKMS.

The trade union, she said, will also organise workshops for workers of all these gardens. "They should be apprised about the steps, like filling up and submitting the forms with all relevant details so that not a single worker is deprived of the payment," Talwar added.

Leaders of the trade union also raised questions over the plan of action adopted by the state labour department. Following the directive of Supreme Court, the department has made moves to start disbursement of the money.

"It is ridiculous that the state labour department has sought records from the managements of the gardens about the workers' dues, despite the fact that it is a section of tea companies which own or owned these gardens, have not paid legitimate dues to the workforce. We apprehend that some tea companies might even provide wrong records," said Talwar.

"On June 11 and June 12, the disbursement will start in Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar respectively. It has been decided to put priority on retired workers and to the family members of workers who have died," said Pashupati Ghosh, additional labour commissioner of the state.

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