

Strike shadow on tea bonus

Siliguri: Representatives of planters' associations have indicated that some tea estates in Terai and Dooars might face problems in paying bonus to workers because of the three-day strike that ended on Thursday.

Every year, the rate of bonus is settled through bipartite talks (among planters' associations and unions) and is disbursed among workers ahead of Puja. Last year, bonus was paid at the rate of 19.75 per cent (of the annual wages and salaries).

"The three-day strike that was called by Joint Forum without any prior notice and at a time when production is at the peak has led to huge losses. Added to this, there will be more loss as the number of plucking rounds will increase from Friday because there was no plucking during these three days. Due to this rise, the quality of tea would come down, leading to realisation of lesser prices," said Prabir Bhattacharjee, secretary general, Tea Association of India.

"In Terai and Dooars, there are a number of gardens which thrive on marginal working capital. The combination of all these losses would upset these gardens and we suspect their capacity to pay bonus might be affected," he added.

The Joint Forum, that is an apex body of 24 tea trade unions, had called the strike demanding immediate fixation and implementation of minimum wage.

According to Bhattacharjee, the north Bengal tea industry is expected to produce around 50 million kilos of teas on August (in August 2017, the production was 49.63 million kg), out of which, the share of tea estates would be around 55 per cent. The rest will come from the small tea sector.

"Thus, if 28 million kg is expected to be produced by tea estates of Terai and Dooars, the loss in production is around 3.23 million kilos, which means a loss of around Rs 40 crores," said the secretary general of TAI.

A representative of another association of tea planters said the Joint Forum's decision appears to be "pre-meditated."

"On August 6, a tripartite meeting was held and it was not a meeting of the Minimum Wage Advisory Committee that has been formed by the state. It is only this committee that can recommend the wage rate to the state#," said the representative.

"Despite knowing this fact, they insisted that the rate has to be fixed immediately, launched a demonstration and called the strike. We suspect it is a pre-meditated plan to create fresh problems for the industry," #the representative added.

After Forum leaders had called the strike, Trinamul trade union leaders had criticised them for "playing politics".

This is because other than the trade unions of Trinamul and Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, unions of all other political parties are constituents of the Forum.

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