

## Kerala: 4,000 tea workers protest bonus cut, keep unions out in Munnar



Tea estate workers of

Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited in Munnar protest against a cut in bonus rates. (Source: Indian Express)

Without the support of trade unions or their leaders, 4,000-odd tea estate workers of Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited (formerly Tata Tea) filled the streets of Munnar hill station in Kerala for the third day on Tuesday, demanding an increase in bonus and daily wages. A major chunk of the agitators were women deployed for plucking tea leaves in the estate.

In a state known for influential trade union leaders, no politicians are leading the agitation from the front. The protesters have not allowed their union leaders of AITUC, CITU and INTUC (of CPI, CPM and [Congress](#), respectively) to join the stir against reducing the bonus to 10 per cent. On Sunday, the workers had attacked the offices of the trade unions. Subsequently, union leaders have gone into hiding. Normal life in Munnar, a major tourist destination in Kerala, was also hit due to the stir. On Tuesday, women workers have started pouring onto the streets of Munnar.

The women alleged that the trade union leaders had colluded with the management of the Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited (KDHP) to deny them 20 per cent bonus. The women workers did not allow the [BJP](#) to intervene in the issue, although the party has called for a dawn-to-dusk bandh in Idukki district on Tuesday.

Devikulam sub-collector P Rajeev, who lead the conciliatory talks, said “the agitation has no leaders. Workers, mostly women, have spontaneously hit the streets. They have brought Munnar to standstill, apart from holding the senior officials of the KDHP as hostages on Monday. The agitators want 20 per cent bonus, but the company is willing to pay only 10 per cent. The labour commissioner has convened a meeting on Tuesday to find a solution,” said the sub-collector.

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The estate management said the tea industry has been going through a severe crisis. The company was forced to reduce the bonus from 20 per cent to 10 per cent this year due to the fall in the profit.

The company said the decision to reduce the bonus was taken after consulting the trade union leaders. The company incurred a fall in its income by 68 per cent in 2014-'15 compared to the previous year. In the past year, the company's profit plunged to Rs 4.2 crore owing to the international fall in the prices of tea. The decision to provide 10 per cent of bonus was taken in the annual meeting of the company, it said.

The KDHP has 13,000 workers in its rolls, most of them women engaged in plucking tea leaves. The workers have 68 per cent of the share of the KDHP, while 18 per cent is held by Tata Tea. The remaining 14 per cent is held by a trust and others.

Sources said the ordinary workers have only 300 shares each with a face value of Rs 10. At the same time, the officers in the company own a major part of the shares given to the workers. Hence, workers were missing the sentiments that they were co-owners of the company.

When Tata Tea divested its stake, the estate was running at an annual loss of Rs 8 crore. However, changing fortunes in the tea sector in the second half of the last decade improved the situation. In 2009, the KDHP had made a profit of Rs 41 crore.

In the earlier years after the formation of the KDHP, the company had claimed that making the workers part of the firm has given them a greater sense of responsibility. However, the revisit of crisis in the tea sector changed the situation and turned the ordinary workers hostile against the management.