



Tea workers make a time-tested protest mode count

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Munnar: The time-tested modus operandi of trade unions in organising protests came to the fore in its full glory in the stir launched by several thousands of women labourers of the Kanan Devan Hills Plantation (KDHP). Though a majority of the protesters were active members of unions affiliated to the major trade unions such as AITUC, INTUC and CITU, they ditched the political label and flags of these organisations while effectively adopting their modes of protest.

The women leaders of these three organisations were successful in passing the information on to the lower hierarchy regarding the strike without giving any hint to the trade unions that totally failed to notice the secret move or prevent the impending labour trouble.

The Devikulam Workers Trade union, which is affiliated to the CPI-backed AITUC, the largest trade union in the sector, has as many as seven group committees, twenty-two estate committees and eighty-seven division committees in the KDHP. The group committee holds the top slot in the organisational hierarchy. The South Indian Plantation Workers Union, the trade union wing of the Congress also follows a similar hierarchical structure. The presence of Devikulam Estate Employees union under the CPM's labour wing CITU is comparatively weaker in terms of the number of group committees.

It is praiseworthy that the organisers could bring together thousands of women by convincing them to set aside their

political differences to crusade for a common cause.

The employees of the plantations under KDHP live close to each other in cottages provided by the company, and many of them are relatives and acquaintances. The unity among them proved vital for successfully organising such a massive stir.

In the beginning, the women leaders were instructed to bring workers from their respective division to the protest venue in Munnar town. The following days saw the labourers striking work and arriving at the venue without any particular instruction.

The stirring slogans, that eventually became a hit on social media, were devised by the agitators themselves by rephrasing the old slogans that were used in trade union-led demonstrations in the past against the government and rival unions leaders.

The local merchants, touched by the resoluteness of the poor labourers who protested on an empty stomach, also contributed their bit to the historic agitation by providing them with food and drinking water.