



## Call to Observe seventh International Tea Day (ITD)

As tea consumption levels swell globally, tea retains the status of one of the most consumed beverages in the world. Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) observes steep rise in the tea composite price, at auction, from an average of \$1.95 per kg in 2007 to a record \$3.18 in September 2009, continuing to remain high through 2010. Retail price of tea also soars high as developed countries witness a 5 per cent and developing countries about 12 per cent increase.

But even as the demand increases and international prices rise, millions of workers in the producing countries who are the backbone of the industry are yet to get their share of this boom. Most of the tea in the world is produced in estates, where workers continue to toil in near bonded conditions, with wages insufficient to meet decent living standards.

The condition of workers (about 11 million) in India, the second largest producer of tea in the world, is illustrative. With brands increasingly divesting from production and concentrating on marketing, planters in India argue that tea production in the present form is becoming unviable, the Plantations Labour Act, 1951 should be amended and the government should share a part of the social costs. Though government has offered sops to planters, reopened closed plantations and taking on the burden of social costs, the workers' predicament continues.

Livelihood in tea industry remains in jeopardy. Increasing contractualisation, infringement on welfare and wage and working conditions, denial of housing and land rights, continued devaluation of women's work, low levels of education and health care and lack of alternate employment opportunities plague the industry.

In a recent wage agreement (November 5, 2011) between industry and workers in West Bengal, wages have increased from a ridiculously low Rs. 67 per day to a ridiculously low Rs.85 (with annual increase of Rs 5 for next two years)for Dooars and Terai. The national floor level minimum wage is fixed at Rs. 115 by the Central government; and Rs 154 for skilled and Rs 127 for an unskilled agricultural worker by the State government. Absurdly low tea worker wages are justified by citing provisions of, in most cases, leaking housing lines and poor educational and health facilities provided by the planters under the Plantation Labour Act, 1951. While the Chinese (the largest tea producer in the World) situation is barely known, the situations of workers in other countries are not substantially different. Notwithstanding that at the same time in April 2011 it was reported that the price of tea was 29% higher than last year in the auction with quality teas reaching Rs 200 - Rs 213 a kg, and the average CTC fetching Rs 150 - Rs 160 a kg. The best Darjeeling tea first flush retail sales touched a whopping Rs 21,000 per kg.

The International Tea Day (ITD) on December 15, being celebrated since 2004, marks an occasion to uphold the rights of tea workers. On this day trade unions, workers' organizations and other civil society organizations have been coming together and organizing seminars, dialogues, public events and submitting memorandum/charter of demands to the governments.

This year, on the occasion of the seventh International tea day (ITD), we the trade unions and workers from all over India once again bring to the notice of tea consumers all over the world and to the citizens of the world, that there is an inherent injustice in the allocation of benefits along the tea value chain. The big corporations should stand scrutiny on the disproportionate accrual of benefits and cannot escape responsibility by shedding off workers or divesting off plantation investment and yet, procuring tea from the auction houses. Governments and the industry should ensure living wage for tea workers. All tea garden workers, who do not have land, particularly women workers, must be guaranteed right to housing and land in tea plantations or in nearby areas. All plantations should come under the jurisdiction of the village panchayat and the administrative machinery should be strengthened.

We also caution the governments of the tea producing countries of world, in the context of increasing free trade agreements among developing countries as well as between developing and developed countries, that special care should be taken to protect the rights of tea workers, already among the lowest in the standard of living indices.

Towards this we urge that trade unions and workers' organisers and activists in all tea producing countries and supporters all over the world take the lead and be proactive. Each union/organisation should devise its own strategy and plan of action for observing the International tea Day. Consultation/Seminars/Conference; Meetings to work out strategic action plans; Workers Assembly; Rally; Public Action and Press Mobilisation can all be possible forms of action. Long term strategy and action programmes need to be planned towards ensuring participation of workers in decision making on policy issues. Cadres organising tea workers need to make strategic plans on how they will facilitate this.

We hope that you will join this call and contribute towards the observance of the International Tea Day. In case any further clarifications are required do feel free to contact us.

Join this call...Observe International Tea Day

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