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KERALA PLANTERS REFUSE TO HIKE WAGES

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In a move that is being seen as a betrayal to plantation workers, planters of Kerala on Sunday expressed inability to raise wages of workers regardless of their one-month-old understanding with the trade unions and the Government on wage hike, saying that the pact was impractical. It is now said that they had agreed to the wage hike in order to help the Congress-led UDF Government in recently concluded civic polls.

“The wage hike and bonus hike are not practical in the present circumstances. There can be no wage hike unless there is an increase in the prices of produces,” said C Vinayaraghavan, chairman, Association of Planters of Kerala, on Sunday morning. However, he later said that the planters were ready to implement the hike if the Government awarded to them the relaxations they had asked for.

The planters are also saying they would deal with any agitation from the part of the workers over the new decision. The refusal to honour the understanding has created a suspicion among the plantation workers and trade unions that the planters and the Government have been betraying them through a dishonest political drama.

Ponbila Orumai (Women’s Unity), the informal unity of the woman workers of Munnar’s Tata-controlled Kanan Devan Hill Plantations (KDHP) which had led a nine-day stir for bonus hike without trade union support, said they would agitate till death to get the wages hiked.

The planters’ association said it would inform the State Government of its decision at the meeting of the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC), the tripartite panel authorised to take decision on wages and welfare of plantation workers, on Monday. The understanding for wage hike was reached at the PLC meeting of October 14 at the end of a 19-day labour strike.

At that PLC meeting, the planters, representatives of the trade unions and the Government had agreed on hiking the wage of workers from `232 a day to `301 in the tea and coffee sectors, from `267 to `330 in the cardamom plantations and to `381 from `317 in rubber sector. A decision was also taken to review the shortcomings in the other benefits of the workers.

Vinayaraghavan said that the plantation sector would collapse if wages were hiked at this juncture. Asked whether the planters had not known of this when they agreed to the demand, he said, “That decision was taken in a special situation. They (Government) wanted us to help them for various reasons including the situation in Munnar (where woman workers were on strike).”

According to the planters, the Government can take its course of action if it is not ready to cooperate with their stand. They also want the settlement period for wage revision to be expanded to four years from the present three years. In this situation, the PLC meeting of Monday is expected to be stormy with the trade unions vehemently opposing the move.

State Assembly’s Opposition Leader VS Achuthanandan, who had stood solidly behind the Ponbila Orumai’s stir, asked the Government to put an end to the “planters’ arrogance” by taking over the plantations through a specially formulated law. He said in Delhi that all possible help would be extended to the workers if they went on strike in the new situation.

However, State Labour Minister Shibu Baby John, the main mediator from the part of the Government at

the crucial PLC meetings that led to the wage hike decision, said the planters who wanted to continue the operation of estates could in no way withdraw from the wage pact. "Nobody should hope to betray the Government and the people," he said.

"Nobody can go back on the decision to hike wages. It cannot be reopened. It was taken at a forum where apart from myself, the Chief Minister and trade union leaders were present," the Minister said, adding that the Government would have to deal with the planters appropriately if their move was part of pressure tactics," the Minister said.