

Unions livid as planters backtrack on pact

- Special Correspondent

Plantation sector in the State appears headed for yet another crisis with the Association of Planters Kerala (APK) saying that they are in no position to implement the wage agreement arrived at the last meeting of the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC) and the trade unions threatening direct action if there is no forward movement on the agreement.

At a news conference here on Sunday, APK chairman C. Vinayaraghavan said the planters had agreed to the wage revision only to help the government on the eve of the local bodies' elections. The plantation industry, he said, was making losses even at the present wage levels. The proposed wage increase would blow the death knell of the industry if appropriate steps were not taken to mitigate 'the unprecedented increase' in the cost of production.

The plantations, he said, were going through a severe cash flow crisis and considering the huge financial implications of the proposed increase in wages, there should be an increase in standard output of tea, rubber, coffee and cardamom, besides various other measures.

The plantations would not be in a position to enter into any wage settlement without these measures and would, in fact, be forced to close down as had happened during the crisis in 1999-2000, he said.

However, trade unions came down heavily on the plantation owners for their volte face. While the Pembilai Orumai in Munnar threatened to take their agitation to the government Secretariat here to press their demand, the CITU and AITUC asked the government to take a stern stand on the issue and enforce the wage agreement.

In Delhi, Leader of the Opposition V.S. Achuthanandan slammed the stand being taken by the plantation owners and asked the government to come clean on the agreement it had reached at the PLC and see to it that it was implemented.

Reacting to the planters' threat, Labour Minister Shibu Baby John said nobody would be permitted to run their plantations after going back on the wage agreement.

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