

Coal India faces third labour strike

Would hit production by at least five mt; BMS might stay away

Avishek Rakshit | Kolkata January 27, 2016 Last Updated at 23:58 IST



All
major

central trade unions, except the Bharatiya Janata Party-backed Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), have decided to go on strike on March 29, which would hit Coal India's production by at least five million tonnes (mt).

The strike threat comes as Coal Minister Piyush Goyal sticks to the government's decision to offload an additional 10 per cent stake in Coal India, thereby bringing down the government's share in the state-owned miner from 79.65 per cent.

The INTUC, CITU, AITUC and HMS — representing about 90 per cent of the miner's workforce of 0.33 million — have consented to a series of action plan to protest the disinvestment move and force the government to address key issues related to contractual workers.

The BMS has differed over the strike call. “The government is already negotiating with the workers,” P K Dutta, general secretary of the BMS-supported Akhil Bharatiya Khadan Majdoor Sangh, told Business Standard.

According to the BJP-backed trade union, Coal India itself can buy 10 per cent of the stake and thus prevent this share falling into “private hands”. “There are provisions by which this can happen,” he added.

The other trade unions, however, were of the view that BMS was yielding to “political pressures” which is reflecting on its conduct in labour mobilisation.

The strike, if it materialises, will be the third such incident by coal workers in a financial year after the Narendra Modi-led government came to power.

In early-January, all the five trade unions had jointly opposed a disinvestment decision, which brought Coal India Rs 22,557 crore by diluting 10 per cent of its stake on January 31, 2015. However, while other issues related to labour and industrial relations escalated and all these five trade unions joined hands to call a strike on September 2 (under the purview of the general industrial strike), the BMS ditched its peers in Coal India at the last moment.

“We called off our support during the September strike as assurances were given by the government over our demands,” Dutta said.

During the recently concluded Nagpur session of the five major trade unions where strike-call was proposed, BMS had sent junior leaders and had refrained from its commitment to support the strike.

“We (Congress, Left and socialist-backed trade unions) have decided to move ahead with the strike proposal and the action plan we had finalised without BMS supporting it,” S Q Zama, secretary general of INTUC-led National Mine Workers' Federation, told this business daily.

These trade unions are confident that the “spirit of the solidarity between workers” will not be damped despite BMS not supporting the “popular voice” of workers.

BMS reportedly commands 18-20 per cent of the workforce while INTUC – the largest trade union – has a base of 40-45 per cent. CITU, AITUC and HMS together is estimated to have a membership between 15-22 per cent.