

Still no pay at seven Duncan tea estates

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Kolkata: Amid legal tussle between Duncans Industries and the Government of India-Tea Board combine, the livelihood of the ill-fated workers of the seven ailing tea gardens in north Bengal still lies in tatters. The non-payment of wages and salaries, which was the primary reason mentioned by the Union commerce ministry for taking over the Duncans-owned gardens through its January 28 notification, is wreaking havoc on the tea garden workers. Neither Duncans nor Tea Board — which hasn't paid a penny for the February and March salary — is willing to take the onus and foot the bill till the ongoing legal case is over.

On Wednesday, the Darjeeling Tarai Dooars Plantation Labour Union (DTDPLU) has written to the Tea Board of India chairman for taking "note of the plight of the workers and organize immediate payment of wages and salaries for February and March". The union on behalf of around 8,000 hapless workers of these gardens has expressed concerns over the gardens' closure and loss of opportunity as far as tea production is concerned. Govind Pradhan, chief coordinator, DTDPLU, wrote: "...currently work is suspended and first flush harvest is already lost as a result, livelihood of the workers are badly affected."

Both the warring parties argue that currently they don't have the onus to pay the wage/salary. When contacted, Tea Board chairman Santosh Sarangi acknowledged receipt of the union's letter. However, he told **TOI**: "Tea Board cannot manage the gardens. We are in the process for finding a suitable agency to whom we can hand over the charge of the management. The last date of submission of expression of interest (EOI) falls on April 12. Following which we might take a call on the bidding process. But I cannot predict any date for picking the new operator. Till then, the onus is on Duncans, which continues to be the owner, to pay the wages to its employees."

Replying to the Tea Board chairman's comment, a senior official of Duncans said, "Why would Duncans foot the bill as the company currently has no authority to run the management, do the tea production and own the produce from these seven gardens. We are not earning revenue from this gardens. Where will we get the money? Also, the matter is subjudice. The estates were taken over for immediate revival of the workers' difficulties, which has not been taken care of by the Board."

According to the company, six other functional gardens in Dooars and Terai owned by Duncans are producing 75000kg of raw green leaves a day which after procurement fetches an average price of Rs 175 a kg from the private buyers.

Sarangji defended the board's stand by saying: "We had to step in because of the mismanagement on the part of Duncans. Why hasn't the tea firm taken stock of their gardens? Why hasn't they paid the salary for so many months before February this year?"

The senior Duncan official retorted that the Tea Board cannot shrug off their present responsibility by bringing in the earlier situation in the gardens. "We had signed a tripartite agreement with the state government and labourers' union on January 22 to start a revival process from February 1 with a Rs 70 crore fund. But the Union commerce ministry didn't allow it to be implemented following January 28 notification of Section 16E of the Tea Act of 1953 and takeover of the gardens."

The ongoing legal tangle seems to continue for long as sources close to the development at both Duncans and Tea Board said that if the high court verdict doesn't go in their favour, they would continue to appeal in the higher court. As a Duncan official put it: "Dooars is difficult terrain for tea industry but we can still make profit from there."

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