

Bengaluru anger: Need PF funds to tide between jobs



PF withdrawal: Police charge the garment workers who were protesting over EPF withdrawal norm, in Bengaluru. (PTI)

It's been weeks since the new norms for EPF withdrawal were announced but the tipping point — that prompted the rollback tonight — lay in the garment district in Bengaluru.

An estimated 1.25 lakh workers — a quarter of the force, most of them women — blocked key roads Tuesday in industrial zones, halting traffic for hours.

Over 100 of them were injured, three seriously; several state buses were damaged, said police. As many as 116 people, including three women, were arrested in connection with the violence, which originated mainly from the Peenya Industrial Area, said police.

Factory owners and managers said the revised rules had affected garment factory workers because of the high attrition rate in the sector — the EPF amount, even if small, sustained them between jobs.

The protests affected production in most garment factories that contribute to exports of over Rs 9,500 crore through the manufacture of apparel for the world's top brands like Jockey, Tommy Hilfiger, Adidas, GAP, etc.

R Lakshmikanth, an employee of Gokuladas Images, a leading garment export firm, said he had planned to quit his job this month and joined the protests after he learnt he would not be able to withdraw his Provident Fund due to the recent amendment.

"I get only Rs 8,000 as salary per month and my wife, who is also a garment factory worker, gets Rs 6,000 per month. Our children

live in our village because we cannot make ends meet in Bengaluru. How can they withhold our PF money until we attain the age of 58? My wife and I were planning to quit our jobs in a few years to start a small business in our village with the PF funds. Now they are saying I cannot access the full amount until I reach the age of 58," said Lakshmikanth.

His was a typical story.

"The EPF amount is very crucial to garment factory workers because they keep changing jobs. They feel the new rule will hit them hard," said a senior manager with over 20 years' experience in the garments sector.

Another senior official at a major garment firm that employs over 7,000 workers said the protests had arisen now because the new EPF law came into effect in April and it was only now that employees began "understanding its real repercussions."

"The intention of the government was to ensure that people have some funds in hand when they reach the age of 58. Employees in the garment industry have understood the new law which gives access to only their contributions to the PF fund prior to the age of 58 in the wrong way. There should have been some debate before bringing in the changes," says the owner of a 20-year-old garment export company with an annual turnover of over Rs 100 crore.

Employees of garment factories who are distrustful of the government and managements believe that the two have conspired to rob them of their legitimate earnings, he said.

"Nearly 80 per cent of the workers in the industry are young women. They normally do not stay in the industry for 20 to 30 years. When they get married, they like to cash in on their PF," said the exporter.

Protests spread to more industrial zones on Tuesday with workers in Peenya, Goraguntepalya, Mysore Road and Bommanhalli hitting the streets.

"On Monday, it was a flash strike against the PF policy. Nearly 80 per cent of protesters were women. We anticipated protests today but it seems that some miscreants joined the protests and caused the violence," said Bengaluru police commissioner N S Megarikh.