

The flavour of Darjeeling

AM Jigeesh



Carry on, comrades The managements blame drought, increased expenditure and issues with trade unions for the closure of tea gardens

As tea gardens shut shop, workers tend to the plants, hoping to form cooperatives for survival

Closing of tea gardens and factories is a new phenomenon in West Bengal, particularly in the Terai region of Darjeeling district. In the last five years about 100 tea gardens and factories were closed down in the area.

The managements, which include the government, blame drought, increased expenditure and issues with trade unions for the closures. But workers, after days of poverty and sufferings, have started taking up the management of many of the closed tea gardens.

The Gangaram Tea Gardens, managed by the Duncan group, was closed down and about 2,000 workers lost their jobs. "The managers left the tea garden. After days of waiting, the workers understood that the factory and the garden were not going to be opened. They started taking care of the plants on their own," recalls Sudip Dutta, a trade union activist in the area.

The workers worked without any wages for four to five months. They pruned and watered the plants and ensured the safety of machinery. "Now new leaves are appearing on those plants. The factory will be opened soon," Dutta adds.

The secretary of CITU, Saman Pathak, says the idea of cooperative mode of running factories is gaining momentum among workers. "What will they do? Their expertise is in maintaining the tea gardens. It is a semi-skilled labour. They are experts in what they do and can run this industry without the help of managers."

HB Chhetri, an employee in the closed down Panighatta Tea estate, echoes Pathak's views. "We don't have political backing. Otherwise, we would have taken up this estate and factory. We hope the governments will help us maintain our job," he said.

"What workers need is some aid from the State or Central government as a capital investment. They will run the industry and bring it back to past glory," says Dutta.

For the first time in tea garden history, about 15 trade unions came together to defend the rights of garden workers. "People are dying here because of malnutrition, lack of medical care and poverty. The government and the managements are turning a blind eye to their problem. Only workers will be able to save the industry from a crisis," Pathak says.

The workers in a number of closed down factories have taken up day-to-day work voluntarily to ensure that nothing

happens to the plants. They find money for their living from other casual work outside the gardens. “This voluntary service is their investment. They are committed to save the industry and it is building towards the formation of cooperatives,” Dutta adds.

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