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Long pending tea workers wage issue is brewing up as a major crisis

By [Debasis Sarkar](#), ET Bureau | 26 Apr, 2016, 05:37PM IST

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SILIGURI: Submerged under the doldrums of ongoing long and multiphase election process in West Bengal, a major problem is brewing up there over the wage issue for around 7 lakh tea workers. The long pending issue may culminate into a major crisis for the whole industry, a pillar for the economy of hilly and foothills region in northern part of the state.



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Several round of meetings during last two years, tug of war between West Bengal government and trade Unions like INTUC or CITU or intervention of central Commerce Minister, nothing could bring in any acceptable solution so far for over 7 lakh tea workers. Finally the issue got submerged under ongoing election process in the state.

As per the system prevailing since 1977, tea workers receive daily wage negotiated once in three years term. The last term ended on 31st March 2014 beginning new negotiation in February 2014.

But barring few trade unions like INTTUC of Bengal's ruling party TMC, almost all trade Unions demanded a change in the whole wage system. They started demanding wage structure as per Minimum Wage Act instead of negotiable wage.

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Following initial one year long reluctance and nine rounds of meetings, finally State Government issued a notice in February 2015 forming a special committee comprising of representatives from planters, workers and Government. The committee was made responsible to propose a new wage structure and other modalities as per Minimum Wage Act.

But, "Nothing practically has come out of the committee in one year. Moreover, all seem to have completely forgotten the matter since the election has been declared. The workers are gradually getting restless and that is not illegitimate," said Saman Pathak, Darjeeling District CITU Secretary and front liner in joint forum.

"Due to the tussle between workers and Government, planters are now cornered from both sides. Any hasty and populist settlement, accepted by the government, will come as unjustified financial overload for us. On the other side, delay in settlement may ignite aggressive workers movement. That will also hamper our business," said veteran planters.

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