

Minimum wage hiked to Rs. 350, but unions firm on strike plan

- Special Correspondent



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Union Ministers Arun Jaitley and Bandaru Dattatreya at a press meet in New Delhi. — Photo: Ramesh Sharma

Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh announces it will not take part in the strike.

The Left-affiliated central trade unions will go ahead with the one-day nationwide strike on Friday, even as the Centre on Tuesday announced sops in a bid to placate the unions.

The peace offering includes a hike in the minimum wage for unskilled non-agricultural workers in central public sector units from Rs. 246 to Rs. 350 a day and formation of a committee to look into extending benefits under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation Act to unorganised sectors, including anganwadi, mid-day meal and Asha volunteers.

The RSS-affiliated Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh saw it as a “historic victory for workers” and decided not to participate in the strike, while the others were dissatisfied and refused to drop the strike plan.

The Finance Ministry also issued a notification on higher bonus to government employees for 2014-15 and 2015-16. This will have a financial impact of Rs. 3,840 crore.

We've agreed to address most demands, says Dattatreya

The government measures meant to allay trade unions and make them drop their proposed strike on Friday include an advisory to States to register unions within 45 days.

They were announced by Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in a briefing with Power, Coal and Mines Minister Piyush Goyal and Labour and Employment Minister Bandaru Dattatreya.

Mr. Jaitley said he “will not link” the announced measures with the strike call given by central trade unions as the Group of Ministers steered by him on labour issues had been working on these proposals for over a year.

“Out of the unions' 12 demands, there were eight labour-related issues and we have agreed to address seven of them. This is a pro-worker government. The UPA government was unable to address even one of their demands,” Mr. Dattatreya said, urging unions to call off the strike in “national interest.”

“There is no concrete proposal to address our demands. The minimum wage for unskilled worker comes out to be near Rs. 9,100 per month which is nowhere near our demand of Rs. 18,000 a month,” AITUC national secretary D.L. Sachdev said. “We have been hearing about the government’s intention to cover unorganised workers under ESIC since the last two years but it has failed to act.”

Terming the BMS’ move not to participate in the strike as “unfortunate”, he said there is no question of going back on the strike call. The BMS had similarly opted out of a strike observed by central trade unions last September. In a press statement on Tuesday, the BMS asked its State units to organise victory marches and publicise the proposals announced by the government.

The minimum wage for unskilled workers will be revised upward soon for workers involved in sweeping and cleaning, watch and ward, loading and unloading, construction, non-coal mines and stone mines for units falling under the central government.

Mr. Dattatreya said unorganised workers, implementing various schemes such as mid-day meal, will be given ESIC facilities for the first time in 45 years. “A committee will look into how much premium workers and the state will have to contribute to the scheme,” Mr. Jaitley said, adding that such people will still be treated as volunteers and not workers as they are involved in transient jobs.

Amendment of law

The Centre, however, continued to press for amending the labour laws. “We want to create a conducive environment in industry so that employment is generated. For that, labour law reforms are necessary but in a positive and pro-worker direction,” Mr. Dattatreya said.

The labour unions have been opposing several proposed amendments to the labour laws.

Mr. Jaitley said that the Centre will be “supporting” the trade unions on legal hurdles holding up the new Payment of Bonus law enacted last year.

Many industrial units in several States have filed 97 court cases in 14 High Courts and the Centre has instructed the Additional Solicitor General to vacate the stay orders, Mr. Dattatreya said.

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