

Press Release

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Constitute a Wage Board... Pay Uniform Wages — Demand Tea Workers in India (Thousands of Workers observe 12th International Tea Day)

“Uniform wages for all tea workers across the country, provided through a wage board” – the demand reverberated in the Raja Bhat tea garden of Kalchini district today, the 15th December 2016, when thousands of tea workers gathered for workers’ assembly as part of the observance of International tea day. The workers from the 22 closed tea estates who struggle to survive without wages or other means of livelihood; and those from the functional tea estates struggling without payment due to the demonetization impact — all participated in the event — to observe their day, air their concerns and urge the government to take immediate steps to avert a colossal humanitarian crisis facing workers and their families.

India is second largest tea producing country in the world, with a production of 1233.14 million kgs during the financial year 2015-16. The sector has more than 1.3 million regular workers and an equal number of temporary and non-resident workers, of which more than half of the workers are women. Statistics show growth in tea production and increase in tea export, yet the condition in which the tea workers live are appalling.

Ashok Ghosh, International Tea Day Convener and West Bengal General Secretary of United Trades Union Congress says: Demonetization cannot weaken our spirits in coming together for raising our concerns. Fighting all odds, we observed ITD, since it is the day to voice our rights”.

ITD observance in Kalchini district has become quite apt now, Says Manohar Tirkey, ex MP from Alipurduar constituency. “3 to 4 tea gardens in Kalchini, adjacent to the place where ITD is observed, has been shut down yesterday due to scarcity of funds to pay the wages in cash due to demonetization issue”, he adds.

The condition of the closed tea estates is more appalling, points out Ashok Ghosh. The workers of the functional estates have realized it and have collected money to buy warm clothes to those in the closed gardens, so that they can face the harsh winter. We have organized a medical camp for the workers. The local people have pitched in, by organizing a blood donation camp as well, he adds.

“Tea workers are among the least paid in India and they work and live in deplorable conditions despite constant vigil by the trade unions. The tea industry’s colonial heritage marked by large scale industrial mode of production using immigrant and indentured labour accentuate the vulnerabilities of tea garden workers”, says J John, Executive Director, Centre for Education and Communication, a labour research and resource centre.

“Government must constitute a Wage Board to decide on the wages of plantation workers and wages should be determined and fixed for tea plantations as per the norms and principles laid down in 15th ILC and Supreme Court directives. The plantations must calculate wages considering 3 consumption unit for a worker without gender discrimination”, emphasizes Ashok Ghosh

“The workers in tea plantations should be given proper pay slips and the wages should be paid for off days”, says Gopal Pradhan, President, Dooar Cha Baghan Mazdoor Union. The wages must have a component of Variable Dearness Allowance to compensate for inflation” he adds.

One of the main demand of the tea workers and their unions is an allotment of permanent homestead land in their existing places of living as per government order, with free access to their places of living. The workers demanded constitution of a Tea Workers’ Housing Development Fund from which a cess should be collected at the rate of 12p per kg of processed tea so that the workers can avail interest free housing loan for building and upgrading houses.

Vazhoor Soman of All India Federation of Plantation Workers, Peerumade, recollecting an earlier demand — land for all and houses for all — during the 2nd ITD observation in Candy Sri Lanka in the year 2006, said, that in Kerala, we are close to materialising these demands. According to him, the Kerala government has taken strong initiatives to provide housing for the tea workers. Under the guidance of Chief Inspector of Plantation, plantation inspectors have already undertaken a survey in the tea gardens and have identified 21000 families, who will be provided with houses soon. “Besides, today, the International Tea Day, at the Idukki Collectorate, Revenue Minister is speeding up the process of finalising the possession documents of 5 cents of land each in Kuttiarvadi allotted to 2100 tea workers”, he adds. Tea workers are demanding *pucca* (permanent) houses for the regular workers with proper sanitation toilets.

December 15 was proclaimed as the International Tea Day by trade unions, labour organisations and other civil society group during an international meeting held in Brazil in 2004 where representatives from almost all tea producing countries of the world were present. ITD is observed to draw universal attention of governments and the public on the problems plaguing the tea industry, the production of tea and the global tea trade and its impact on workers.

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