

Munnar's women tea workers lead the strike

By Preetu Nair, TNN | 20 Sep, 2015, 10.43AM IST

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Vijayamma Sughadev, 45, has spent most of her adult life in a shrimp peeling shed in Ambalappuzha, a coastal town in southern Kerala. She is among the 300 women working at the MRF Shrimp Peeling shed, earning all of Rs 14 per day for skinning a kilo of prawns. She and her co-workers want a hike - just Rs 6 more per kilo - but they are not banking on the unions that represent them to fight this battle with the owners.

"We have no faith in trade unions. We are inspired by the success of the Munnar women's agitation because we too are fighting for our livelihood," says Sughadev. More than 6,000 women from 250 other shrimp peeling sheds in the area have joined her in the strike.

The Munnar story Sughadev is referring to is that of Pembila Orumai (women's unity). Earlier this month, a bunch of women workers at Kanan Devan Hills Plantation Company Private Limited (KDHP) had struck work for nine days, taking to the streets to protest low wages and hard working conditions. Till recently, they were shy, smiling faces on Munnar's tourist brochures, cane baskets strapped to their backs. But there was nothing docile about how these overworked and underpaid women plantation workers almost brought the hill station to a standstill and forced the state government to take note of the agitation. Most of the women are of Tamil origin and had barely passed high school.

The agitators were not only adamant that they wouldn't deal with trade unions to negotiate their demand for a 20% bonus but also refused to let men into their strikes. "They can be easily influenced by liquor," says Gomathy, who spearheaded the campaign, dismissively. The only exception was CPM leader VS Achuthanandan, who was allowed to join the protest.

Most women who participated in the agitation have barely passed high school. Usha Thyagarajan, one such worker, shows her pay slip during a protest demonstration in Munnar.

This was an agitation with a difference. By 8am, after the women finished their morning chores, they would take to the streets. Tourists said they were stunned at the sight of women who quietly go about their work at picturesque plantations suddenly take up the battle for workers' rights. During lunch, the strikers would get together and discuss their next plan of action; some visited temples and churches to seek divine intervention. They kept at this for nine days till the management gave in and agreed to a higher bonus.

Soon, the women were being talked about everywhere. Politicians and bureaucrats said they were stumped by this unusual stir. As for the trade unions, they didn't know what hit them. "We are surprised with the workers' reaction. We have been working for their benefit and will continue doing the same. It is sad that they are not willing to believe us now," says AK Mani, president, South Indian Plantation Workers Union (INTUC).

But observers say the Munnar story was waiting to happen. "Women workers were familiar with how unions functioned. The demands of women are often overlooked or subordinated by demands made by the organized male workers or by the male leadership of trade union.

It is possible that the women have run out of patience," says Praveena Kodoth, associate professor, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.

The impatience has indeed spread elsewhere as well. Women workers at Harrison's Malayalam Ltd's tea estates in Idukki and Wayanad districts are now on strike demanding a minimum salary of Rs 500 and 20% bonus. Though HML has served a show-cause notice to eight workers on strike, they remain undeterred. "We will continue with our agitation till our demands are met," says Smitha, among those served the show cause notice.

Mainstream unions, rattled by these sporadic strikes, are beginning to react faster to employee unrest. Aralam Farming Corporation



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(Kerala) Limited is a public sector undertaking for tribals resettled in Kannur district. Women employees here had called for a strike starting Monday for the implementation of a pay revision promise and regularization of casual jobs. But the unions have decided to throw their weight behind the strike.

"We have three unions here, the INTUC, CITU, and AITUC, and in this agitation we are united because the fight is for a common cause," said Jose K T, [secretary of the AITUC unit](#) in Aralam.

As Kodoth points out, it is not that women workers are docile or unaware of their rights. "They are agree to work for less because they are breadwinners for their families. It is not that they don't know how to struggle. This nine-day strike proves that they can struggle against a capitalist management and masculine trade union in their own interest as workers," she says.

(Inputs from Sudhakaran P in Kannur and Sajimon PS in Alappuzha.)

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