



Tea workers block road over bonus demand

DARJEELING
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Traffic came to a standstill for nearly 30 minutes today in Darjeeling town, as workers of the Dhootriah, Peshok and Kalej Valley tea gardens squatted on the road demanding puja bonus at 19 per cent. The Assistant Labour Commissioner (ALC) had called a meeting today to discuss the pending bonus of the three gardens. Trade unions of the tea gardens were present, but the owners did not attend the meeting, forcing negotiations over the phone. The three gardens were represented by the general manager of Dhootriah estate.

As word began spreading that the negotiation had reached a dead end, workers gathered outside the ALC office started chanting slogans. They then squatted on the road bringing traffic to a screeching halt. It was only when the police and trade union leaders intervened that the agitated workers lifted their blockade.

In August, the Mumbai-based Trident Agro cum Export Private Limited took over the three tea gardens from the Trinamool Congress MP K.D. Singh-owned Alchemist Group.

The new owners have refused to give bonus at 19 per cent as has been accepted by other tea gardens. Instead, the Trident group has proposed to give 11.33 per cent as bonus to be distributed in two installments. While 8.33 per cent will be given before Diwali, the rest is to be distributed in December.

Trade unions affiliated to the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the TMC, Jan Andolan Party, CPRM and the GNLF have refused the company's offer. "We will not accept anything less than 19 per cent as has already been agreed upon and distributed in other tea gardens. We hear that the official handing over process has also not been completed, which is a cause of concern for us," said Suraj Subba, general secretary of the GJM's Darjeeling Terai Dooars Plantation Labour Union (DTDPLU).

With today's meeting reaching a stalemate, the ALC has asked the trade unions and the management to continue the discussion tomorrow at two in the afternoon.

J.B. Rai, secretary of the Darjeeling Zilla Tea Employees and Workers Union that is affiliated to the TMC, said, "We will not accept anything less than 19 per cent. We have proposed that the workers be given 11.33 per cent before Diwali and the rest within this year. But this too we will accept under protest."

The garden management though is adamant, saying it would not be possible to give 19 per cent bonus as is being demanded by the trade unions. "Our company's instruction is to distribute 8.33 per cent Diwali and 3 per cent before December. I have no instructions to increase the bonus above 11.33 per cent," said Suman Moktan, general manager of Dhootriah tea garden.

Moktan admitted that although the Trident group had taken over the three tea gardens, no official circular had been issued as yet. "There are some documents yet to be signed, hence the delay in the handing over. We expect it to be done within this year," he said.

The Dhootriah, Kalej Valley and Peshok tea gardens has a total workforce of more than 2,500 workers. (EOIC)



