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Fast relief for garden

- State rushes to get tea estate reopened to save face

OUR CORRESPONDENT



Samsing Tea Estate. Picture by Biplab Basak

Jalpaiguri, Dec. 24: The Bengal administration has intervened to reopen a Dooars tea garden within seven days of its closure because of alleged vandalism by a Trinamul-backed union.

Sources said the administration showed unusual alacrity in fast-tracking negotiations to open Samsing Tea Estate, which employs 1,460 labourers, because it did not want a garden to close over law-and-order issues at a time the Mamata Banerjee government had been highlighting the woes of estate workers because of demonetisation.

At a tripartite meeting involving the management of the tea estate in Jalpaiguri's Malbazar, representatives of the Trinamul-backed Terai-Dooars Plantation Workers' Union and the sub-divisional officer today, an agreement was reached that the garden would reopen on December 26.

The Siliguri-based PCM Group that owns Samsing had announced suspension of work on December 20 after four leaders of the union allegedly ransacked the garden office and assaulted two assistant managers, accusing them of not making the estate ambulance available to a casual worker.

"In recent times, this will be the first instance of a garden reopening within seven days of suspension of work. Usually, negotiations drag on for months and years," a representative of a tea planters' association said.

A source said the administration fast-tracked the talks to reopen Samsing "in record time". Around 5,000 people live in the garden, which has a plantation area of 910 hectares.

The source said the Terai-Dooars Plantation Workers' Union had assured the management that it would not intervene in the police case in which the four labour leaders have been named.

"The closure of a tea estate because of law-and-order problems would have been a loss of face for Trinamul at a time it is blaming the Centre's demonetisation drive for the problems in gardens," the source said.

Workers in many tea estates have not been getting wages because of the cash crunch.

Recently, tourism minister Gautam Deb and some other Trinamul leaders blamed CITU and CPM leaders for the closure of Tirrihannah Tea Estate in the Terai over a wage-payment

dispute. Against the backdrop of such allegations, the suspected involvement of labour leaders associated with the ruling party in the closure of a garden had come as an embarrassment for Trinamul.

"That is why the administration was asked to take remedial measures and the union was told not to stand by the accused leaders and instead cooperate with the management," a tea industry insider said.

A source said V.S. Parmar, a senior management official of Samsing, explained the situation that forced the company to announce suspension of work. Instead of arguing, the union leaders assured the management that peace would be maintained and labourers would be allowed to work.

"We have decided to reopen the garden on December 26. In fact, most of the managerial employees returned to the garden today," Parmar said after the meeting.

Sukra Munda, the Trinamul MLA of Nagrakata and a leader of the Terai-Dooars Plantation Workers' Union, said: "It is good that today's meeting turned out to be a positive one."



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