
J John

Background

International Tea Day was observed on December 15, 2005, worldwide to draw the attention of governments and citizens to the impact of current forms of global trade in tea on workers, small growers, and consumers. The decision to observe International Tea Day was taken after deliberations among various international organizations and trade unions during the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, 2004 and Porto Alegre, 2005. In India the call to observe International Tea Day was given by the trade unions — AITUC, AICCTU, BMS, CITU, HMS, INTUC, UTUC, NTUI, and TUCC — and the Centre for Education and Communication, New Delhi. Subsequently, a one-day programme was held in New Delhi on December 15, 2005. Besides the trade union members, small growers, voluntary organizations, and academicians were among the key participants in the programme. The broad objective of the programme was to affirm the rights of plantation workers and small growers in the context of the emerging global trade regime.

Objectives

Following were the major objectives of the International Tea day programme.

- To affirm the rights of tea plantation workers and small growers in the context of the emerging global trade regime
- To build awareness and responsiveness among all the concerned bodies: owners, management, government, trade unions, and workers with regard to both trade and labour standards
- To identify necessary policy decisions both nationally and internationally and to advocate the promulgation of policy decisions, institutional systems, and their implementation
- To suggest regulatory mechanisms, including transparent monitoring systems, to be set up at various levels
- To strengthen future advocacy and campaign at an international level
- To facilitate tea consumption and promotion of trade in tea

Address by the Chief Guest and Other Dignitaries

International Tea Day began with an introduction by Ashok Ghosh, General Secretary, UTUC, Kolkata. He mentioned the deliberations that took place at the World Social Forum in Mumbai, India, 2004 and Porto Alegre 2005, and emphasized the rationale for observing an International Tea Day. On behalf of the Central trade unions, Ashok Ghosh proposed a presidium, comprising members from AITUC, AICCTU, BMS, CITU, HMS, and INTUC. He welcomed Mohammad
Amin, Minister for Labour, West Bengal, the Chief Guest of the programme, and requested him to inaugurate the conference.

Minister Mohammad Amin stressed upon the consequences of uneven competition and fall in tea auction prices, and referred to the significant job loss in the tea gardens of India. The prevailing situation has led to about 60,000 workers being rendered jobless till now. In his opinion, conspicuously substantial variations in wages across the countries could be attributable for the uneven competition among producing countries. He requested all the representatives and government bodies from across the world present at the conference to ensure decent wages, social security, housing, education, and sanitation facilities for the workers and small growers and to find out ways and means for a ‘healthy trade’ by ruling out uneven competitiveness.

He cited the case of West Bengal where the government extended help and relief to the workers through the panchayat. A scheme subsuming a financial aid of Rs 500 per month is being implemented for the workers in the closed or abandoned tea gardens in the State to avoid starvation-related deaths. The State government paid Rs 25 crore for the closed tea gardens, mills, and factories. He stressed on the importance of the tea industry as a source of livelihood for workers and small growers and appealed to all the representatives from different countries to come forward for the sustenance of the industry. He concluded his speech by highlighting the need for more organized activities at various levels.

Dawa Narbula, Member of Parliament (MP) from West Bengal welcomed the observation of the International Tea Day. He said that the tea industry contributes the largest share of revenue to the State government and also provides the largest share of employment in West Bengal. Tea gardens in Darjeeling employ around 55,000 workers on a permanent roll and 20,000 workers on contract basis during the plucking season. The workers in most of the tea gardens are deprived of their basic rights and facilities stated under the Plantation Labour Act (PLA), 1951, he said. He invited the attention of all authorities concerned for taking up stringent measures to ensure the provisions under the PLA for workers.

Joachim Baxla, Member of Parliament, West Bengal, highlighted the issue of price stabilization of tea through monitoring mechanisms. He mentioned that there is no price monitoring mechanism available for a significant chunk of tea (40–45 per cent) sold through auction. Promotion of tea in the context of declining per head consumption was yet another debate triggered by the speaker. He pointed out the role of the Tea Board in the promotion of tea trade in India. His speech also touched upon issues relating to healthy competition among tea-producing countries and effective and meaningful utilization of funds released to the industry. The MP also drew everyone’s attention towards the payment of bills, especially overdue bills like retirement benefits to workers.

D. Chakrabarti, Former Secretary General of the Indian Tea Association and Adviser, JustTea Project, explained the history of global tea trade. Tea has always been an important commodity of trade even before the era of globalization, he said. He attributed the decline of tea prices to global oversupply due to the emergence of several new players in the global tea market over the
last few decades. The growth of the small growers segment has led to increase in the supplies affecting the prices of the domestic zone. In his opinion, there was significant scope of increasing the per head consumption of tea in India. He explained that the domestic consumption of tea in India is around 630–670 million kg per year and the per head consumption of tea is 630–640 grams annually, which is much less than that in many tea-consuming countries like the UK or Pakistan. He stressed the need to expand the domestic market to tide over the crisis instead of relying merely on international market, where access is largely dependent on competitiveness. He expressed the need to administer the supply to keep a check on quality, which would automatically cut down the quantity.

J. John, Executive Director, Centre for Education and Communication, while placing the New Delhi Declaration on the rights of tea workers and small growers adopted at the twoday International Tea Conference before the audience, positioned the current crises of the tea industry in the changing milieu of production organization. He emphasized that the general shift found in tea production units from the estate system to the small tea growers is primary due to higher level of efficiency and lower cost of production of the latter. Additionally, such a shift was largely being promoted by big plantations and brands that disengaged from primary commodity production and moved to retailing and brand building in search of higher profits. In India, the small tea growers segment account for 20 per cent of the tea production. In such a situation, governments should not encourage trade policies that cater to tariff reduction, resulting in unhealthy and unethical competition among countries, which would also lead to unemployment.

Swapan Mukherjee, Joint Secretary, AICCTU, expressed his solidarity with the International Tea Conference and the decision to observe International Tea Day. He said that the small farmers and growers were affected due to the WTO trade regime and it was extremely necessary for governments to intervene to fix floor-level price for the survival of the small growers and workers. He highlighted the case of the Dumduma Tea Estate in Assam, which has been taken over by Hindustan Lever. Such mergers and takeovers in the tea sector by companies such as Nestle and Unilever were increasing, he said. He restated that the crisis was man-made and induced by the policies. He stressed the need for a more united action for plantation workers and small growers.

M. A. Ramaih, General Secretary, Red Flag Association, Sri Lanka, explained the context of privatization of tea plantations in Sri Lanka. He mentioned that former nationalized plantations in Sri Lanka had begun to be privatized following pressure from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) as part of the conditionality for financial assistance. The Asian Development Bank had granted a loan of Rs 300 million to the private sector for developing the plantations. Subsequently, an increasing trend of downsizing of workforce in large plantations was noted. He said that this was executed largely in tune with the compulsions of these organizations. The banks have now started intervening in the management of the estates. He further pointed out that large Indian tea companies were controlling plantations in Sri Lanka and that “the companies will not invest if there is no profit”. He said that given the background of brand and bank domination (largely referring to the conditionalities and compulsions of banks),
it was important for the working class movement to express solidarity in the international movement.

Somesh Biswas, President, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, West Bengal, expressed concern that the crisis in the industry was adversely affecting workers, small growers, factory owners, and others. Therefore, there should be coordinated efforts from all stakeholders including workers, growers, management, government, and trade unions to revitalize the industry.

Patrick Kadyanji, President, Plantation and Workers Union, Malawi, took note of the increasing trend of de-unionization in the tea sector in Malawi. According to him, there were 83,000 plantation workers who were scared to join unions for the fear of losing their jobs. Another problem in unionizing was the scattered nature of workforce, which made it all the more difficult to commute and communicate.

Aggrey Lazurus Mwakajila, Chairman, Rungwe Smallholder Tea Growers Association, Tanzania, congratulated Asia — China, India, and Sri Lanka — as the first and the largest producer of tea. He highlighted issues pertaining to Africa where international trading was practised through Fair Trade in most parts. As per the norms of Fair Trade, a minimum price for tea is fixed so that even if prices fall, tea is bought at a fair price. He said that small holders added a value of about 24–25 per cent. The increase in the price of tea is found to be directly proportional to the addition of value in many cases. For instance, in Tanzania, there was a substantial increase in price where the value addition was up to 40 to 45 percent.

H. Mahadevan, Deputy General Secretary, AITUC, held forth on the effect of the prescription of LPG — liberalization, privatization, and globalization — on the financial health of the world, by the ‘three international doctors’ (WTO, World Bank, and IMF). This, according to him, had only created more ill health, as in the case of the tea industry and agriculture. He underlined the importance of trade union movements to work in alliance with the working class movement. The problems of tea industry, workers, and small growers must be combined and carried forward, he said. According to him, the Parliamentary Standing Committee has recommended replanting of tea bushes in India. Stressing on these points, he explored the possibilities of planning regional programmes in all the participating countries in connection with International Tea Day.

Raymond Jatmiko Kusnadi, International Officer, Congress of Indonesia Unions Alliance (KASBI), extended support to all trade unions of India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Bangladesh on behalf of Indonesian workers. According to him, the problems of exploitation of capitalism, disorganization were similar everywhere in the world. He called for a united action including all sectors.

Suneet Chopra, Joint Secretary, All India Agricultural Workers Union, opined that it was important to speak about the new situation in terms of liberalization, globalization, and privatization. He pointed out that there was no rule of the law in any situation covering the working class and unorganized sector. He underscored the need to come together, organize, and
fight for a common cause. Referring to the delayed comprehensive agriculture legislation, which was framed in 1980, he drew the attention of the conference to the need to fight for legislative measures for safeguarding the agriculture sector. He asserted that the one and only way out was organization and fight for the rights of the workers and small growers.

**Tapan Datta**, Chief Advisor, Chittagong Tea Garden Workers’ Union, Bangladesh, thanked the organizers of the conference on behalf of the workers of Chittagong. He mentioned that the tea workers were among the poorest in Bangladesh, as compared to India. He stressed that the conference was a beginning and a process to fight against the pressures of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO.

**Leyla Tegmo Reddy** welcomed all the delegates and participants from various regions. She mentioned that the decline in the wholesale price of tea affected labour relations and the quality of life of the tea workers and their families and small growers. She appreciated the networking organized by the unions to fight to alleviate poverty. She further mentioned that the ILO was extremely concerned about the inhuman conditions in which the workers were forced to work in tea plantations and the deficits in decent work in the plantation sector. She also stressed the need for promotion of occupational safety and health for workers in the tea plantations and for generating awareness on this issue. In March 2004, the ILO organized a tripartite meeting with different stakeholders to understand the common problems in the Indian tea industry. She hoped to remain engaged in encouraging decent work in the tea industry in India and looked forward to continue working together with the tea workers.

**Samir Roy**, General Secretary, HMS, West Bengal State Council, thanked Leyla Tegmo Reddy for her deliberations. He mentioned that the ILO had worked earlier in the field of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) and child labour and was now working in the area of decent work. He appealed to her to take up the issues of HIV/AIDS in the tea sector. He then requested H. Mahadevan to read out a message sent by the associated European tea community. The message shed light on various issues subsuming trade justice movements, fair trade, fighting against the WTO, plantation labour, celebrating the issue of tea conference, and solidarity and support by networking with concerned organizations in the UK.

**Devendra Sharma**, from the Forum of Bio Technology and Food Security, after addressing the delegates mentioned that since inception, tea industry has been ‘corporate agriculture’. He referred to the case of West Bengal, the State that had made progressive steps in the field of agriculture and labour, moving to corporate agriculture and steps like permitting FDI in retailing. He highlighted some of the key issues with regard to the global situation in the tea sector as well. He pointed out the contradictions in tea export and established that aspects like value addition, processing, brand building, and marketing were vital in the exports of tea. For instance, though India, China, Sri Lanka, and Kenya were the main producers of tea, the major exporters were England, Luxembourg, and Belgium as they value-added, processed, and marketed tea. Even though these three countries did not grow tea, they had the largest share in the market. He pointed out the need to understand the reason for such gaps. He clarified that the problem lay with the incentives for export promotion that the big companies availed in their home countries.
He also expressed concern over falling commodity price and raising the consumer price of tea. Aspects such as Intellectual Property Rights and patenting of tea that give an edge to the big companies were discussed in the context of falling commodity prices of tea. According to him, this could be a major reason for the gap in prices. He raised some pertinent questions that require further scientific analysis regarding multilateral, regional, and bilateral trade agreements and patents and their impact on competition, pricing, and working conditions.

**Chitta Dey**, Convenor, Coordinator Committee of Tea Plantation Workers, West Bengal, invited attention to the problems of the workers in the plantations. Workers were the most affected group in the present crisis in the industry. The wages of workers had been reduced in all tea gardens across the country. This had plunged the workers into extreme situations of poverty. He was of the opinion that the industrialists and governments, both at the Centre and State, were responsible for the crisis in the tea industry. He ended his speech highlighting the importance of working as per the ethos of the Universal Declaration.

**P.T. John**, Secretary, Plantation Working Class Union, Kerala, highlighted the conditions of the tea plantation workers and small growers in Kerala. He mentioned the formation of the Plantation Working Class Union and its activities in helping in the reopening of tea gardens. He raised the issue of continuing lockouts in most of the large plantations in Munnar and Peerimedu areas of Kerala. The situation had forced thousands of plantations workers into poverty and inhuman living conditions. The workers did not get subsidized food grains, electricity, and medical facilities in the region.

**J John**, like other speakers, expressed concern over the existing gap in the commodity and consumer prices of tea. While the minimum price of tea in the market was Rs 120 per kilogram, raw leaf was priced at less than Rs. 7 per kilogram. In such a situation, small growers were unable to sell their raw leaf, as it did not recover their cost of production. He also mentioned the non-cooperation of Indian Railways while the small growers’ organization pitched for the right of serving tea in trains and railway stations. He opined that the quality standards as set by the railway were aimed at promoting big brands like ‘Tata Tea’. He brought in other pertinent issues such as land rights and safety measures for workers. Referring to the cases of cancer and skin diseases among women workers in the plantations in Kerala, he mentioned that weedicides and herbicides were also affecting the health of the workers along with pesticide exposure. He pointed out the need to focus on the health issues of the women workers in tea plantations.

**Kumari Kujur**, Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), West Bengal, requested the international delegates to incorporate the specific issues of women and children involved in plantation works in the proposed International Declaration. She explored the scope of including issues such as the health conditions of women and children and education of children in the future course of actions. She further added that there was a need to create awareness on health (not be limited to family planning), education, and employment issues among tea plantation workers.
Samir Roy, Convenor, Federation of Indian Plantation Workers, reminded the gathering that since the end of the 1990s the workers had been experiencing the bitter effects of crisis in the tea industry. He elucidated upon the multifaceted problems of people associated with tea industry. As many delegates observed, the most affected group of the present crisis were workers who were not even getting their wages and other fringe benefits. In his view, trade unions often settled for lower wages in the name of the crisis in the industry. During 2001–03, many workers and their dependents died of starvation in the tea gardens of West Bengal and Kerala. He raised the issue of remuneration of workers and small growers. He called for a standard rate of remuneration for both small growers and workers, referring to the Sri Lankan concept of 60:40 of the share price. All the participants accepted this proposal unanimously. He stressed the issue of implementation of the proposed agenda in the declaration.

Prabhat Tirki, West Bengal, pointed out that the problems were the same everywhere in the world under the WTO policies. He thanked the organizers, especially the Centre for Education and Communication, for facilitating the conference. He took note of CEC’s earlier fact-finding exercise in West Bengal that brought the attention of the State government on the conditions of the workers in the tea estates. Workers in closed tea gardens were now getting a sum of Rs 500 per month from the State government, under the Food for Work Programme. He thanked all the delegates, both national and international, for making the meeting a success. The chair thanked Prabhat Tirki and invited Vinod Kumar to deliver the vote of thanks.

Vinod Kumar, Joint Secretary, LPF, thanked the organizers, speakers, trade unions, and small growers from all the participating countries and States in India, and the CEC for conducting the conference. Ashok Ghosh added a vote of thanks to the trade unions for organizing the event and to the members of CEC — J. John, Rinju Rasaily, Sindhu Menon, Devan, and others — for making the International Tea Conference and the International Tea Day successful. The participants resolved to observe International Tea Day in the following years.

Follow-up Actions

The conference decided to follow up the International Tea Day campaign and use the declaration as an instrument of advocacy and implementation. The follow-up activities chalked out in the conference subsume the following areas.

- Exchange of tea workers between Asia and Africa to visit plantations
- Building strong national coalitions and campaigns to raise issues in the declaration
- Lobbying governments, growers, companies, trade unions, etc. in trade in tea producing and consuming countries
- Creating awareness of Tea Day and its objectives among international, national, and local NGOs, trade justice networks, fair-trade organizations, trade policy makers, companies, and consumers
- Dealing with the aspects of the declaration relating to labour rights, health and safety, and women’s rights at a national level
- Formation of an International Advisory Group
- Preparation of a briefing to call for a commodity agreement on tea
• Production of materials for national, regional, and international Tea Justice Campaign
• Fund raising and mobilization of resources
• Plans for Tea Day 2006 in Sri Lanka
• The conference also explored the possibility of a solidarity campaign on tea with the support and participation of all concerned organizations and the creation of an International Tea Commission for commodity agreement on tea.