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India

# Tea Garden Workers starve to death

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**Tea gardens in West Bengal continue to be sites of super-exploitation of workers. The death due to starvation of six persons from the Raipur Tea Estate in North Bengal has driven home this point once again. Yet the only response of the government of West Bengal has been to announce one more Committee to discuss the matter.**

The matter is a straightforward one. For at least one decade, tea plantations in West Bengal have been closing, workers have been paid terribly low wages, not paid in the name of crisis of the industry, and have suffered from malnutrition and starvation. According to the 51st Annual Report 2004-05 of Tea Board of India, a total of 118 tea gardens were reportedly closed between the years 2000-2005 that had affected 68,442 workers.

In many of the tea gardens, owners do not declare the tea garden as closed but 'conveniently' abandon them. The company has to apply for closure in order to close a garden. These companies owe huge dues not just to the workers in terms of Provident Fund and Gratuity dues but also to the respective state governments and concerned banks.

An important feature/nature of such closures and abandonment was that the tea gardens would reopen during the peak season and again close during the lean period as in the case of one tea garden in West Bengal that was closed five times during 2001-2006 and on 13 January 2006 it was closed permanently. In Raipur Tea Estate, there had been previous cases of starvation deaths, recorded as far back as 2005. In all, a few thousand workers and their family members have died out of starvation and malnutrition in the last one decade.

As a result of ill payment, plantation workers have been caught in a viscous circle of poverty, poor literacy and ill health, with children of tea workers ending up in the same ill paid work as their parents and grandparents before them.

Radical Socialist condemns the collusion of owners and governments that have made possible repeated deaths of workers and the systematic super-exploitation of the laboring force for the profit of the owners. While the Minister for labour, purnendu Bose, acknowledged the possibility of malnutrition, his colleague, Jyotipriya Mallick has blamed the tea labourers, saying they do not take government medical aid and that is the cause of their deaths. We condemn this policy of civering up for owners and blaming the victims.

Neither the previous, nor the current state government of West Bengal has done anything concrete for the workers. Yet there are obvious remedies that need to be taken up.

? In the first place, the Tea Act should be invoked and any plantation that is not being run properly should be taken over by the government.

? In the second place, factory and plantation books should be inspected with full participation by workers representatives elected by them, so that action can be taken against managers and owners who have not paid PF, etc to workers.

? The right to life is higher than the right to profit. Take over the wealth of the owners who flout laws and push workers to death, to ensure the survival of the workers