Written by Administrator
Wednesday, 02 May 2012 12:49

Gender Column - Women workers in Tea Plantations and trade unions

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Tea plantations: context

The tea industry in Indiais one of the oldest industries and one of the largest employers in the organized sector. Over 12 hundred thousand permanent and almost the same number of casual and seasonal, workers are employed in the tea industry. Over 50 per cent of the workers, and in some operations like tea plucking, over 80 per cent of the workers, are women.

Relations on the plantations:

There are broadly four categories of personnel on the plantations – management, staff, sub-staff and workers. But the workers who work on the plantation comprise the bulk of the workforce of the plantation. The ‘field workers’ are engaged in plucking and activities related to the maintenance of the plantation and the bushes. These include hoeing, weeding, pruning, drainage, spraying of pesticides and insecticides, etc. Nearly all of thismost difficult and hazardous work,involving carrying very heavy loads,is performed by women workers. Women carry more than 40 kgs of green leaf on their backs every day for years since they are very young, and later whether they pregnant or old.

Over 90 per cent of the tea workers are either Scheduled Tribes or Scheduled Castes – the lowest in the caste, ethnicity, class and resource hierarchy. Most of the families of the workers have been forcibly or fraudulently brought to the tea gardens several generations ago.

The work of tea workers is arduous in addition to being low paid and insecure. Tea pickers are on their feet all day with heavy baskets on their backs, often on uneven terrain and in harsh weather conditions. Injuries are common, as are respiratory and water-borne diseases. There is often exposure to pesticides and insecticides, which the ILO cites as one of the major health and safety hazards tea workers face.

The Picture of Industrial Relations in the Tea Industry:

Tea plantations have employed women as pluckers since the inception of the tea industry. In the initial period, there was a great deal of family labour. The 15th session of the Indian Labour Conference in 1957 decided that the formula for fixing minimum wages for an adult worker should be based on the costs of three units of consumption. The employers in the tea industry argued that since employment was family based, the ratio of 1:3 was too high and only 1.5 units of consumption should be taken into account for fixing minimum wages.

It is a matter of grave concern and an interesting point of research how the employers have been able to keep the wages of tea workers abysmally low, even over six decades of legislative provisions. The wage of the majority of tea workers is less than US$ 2 per day in large parts of the country and would come within the definition of extreme poverty. Tea is an example of a sector where several generations of workers have been kept in systematic poverty, despite almost all of them being members of unions. These conditions have drastically and systematically worsened in the last ten years.

All these factors contribute to the skewed **structure of `rewards' in global the tea industry,** a s the War on Want report
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brings out:

53% retailer (e.g. supermarket)

33% blender (e.g.Typhoo, Tetley)

7% factory

6% trader/buying agent

1% tea auction/broker