

Tata Continues Collective Punishment of Indian Tea Workers

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Urgent Action 15-01-2010

Nearly one thousand tea workers and their families continue to suffer collective punishment at the hands of India's Tata Group.

Workers at the Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate [See below] in West Bengal, India went without pay, food and rations from September 14 until December 12 last year following a protest in August over the mistreatment of Mrs. Arti Oraon, a 22 year-old tea garden worker who was denied maternity leave and forced to continue work as a tea plucker despite being 8 months pregnant [[1](#)].

In response to the protest, management shut down operations for over two weeks, only reopening on September 8 on condition that 8 workers allegedly responsible for the spontaneous action be suspended and disciplined. When workers demanded time to respond, management again closed the estate on September 14.

During the three months to December 12, during which there was no pay and no statutory rations, the only food the workers received was a single serving of emergency relief supplies distributed by the local district administration, normally reserved for the victims of natural disasters. The lockdown was clearly intended to teach the workers a lesson: if you want to eat, renounce your right to protest!

The Nowera Nuddy estate was reopened on December 12 following a meeting the previous day between management, trade unions and the Deputy Labour Commissioner. Tetley's Peter Unsworth announced, in response to protest messages, that an "honorable settlement" had resolved the conflict.

If a formal agreement was reached to reopen the estate, no worker has ever seen it. The 8 workers remain suspended. The workers have not received any wages or rations owed them from the period of the lockdown.

A large and growing majority of workers have signed a petition circulated by the Action Committee which led the struggle, with IUF support, during the brutal 3-month lockdown pushed thousands of workers to the brink of starvation. The petition calls for the full payment of all wages, rations and other entitlements for the period of the closure; reinstatement of the suspended workers with full payment of wages, rations etc.; full disclosure of the terms under which the estate was reopened; an apology and compensation to Mrs. Arti Oraon; and assurances from management that pregnant workers' legal right to light duties from 6.5 months and paid leave from 7.5 months would be fully respected.

Tata Tea is a powerful global company; its wholly owned Tetley Tea is one of the world's biggest-selling tea brands. Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate is owned by Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited,

a company 49.98% owned by Tata Tea. Tata and Amalgamated share the same office in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal. Tea from Amalgamated Plantations' tea estates goes into the famous Tetley Tea bags. Tetley Tea is also a member of the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP), whose standard commits member companies to ensure, among other requirements, that there is no "harsh or inhumane treatment" of plantation workers.

The struggle for justice continues at Nowera Nuddy, led by the workers' Action Committee. You can support their demands - click here to send a message to Tata/Tetley!

http://www.iuf.org/cgi-bin/campaigns/show_campaign.cgi?c=472

Ethical? Tetley's Tata Tea Starving Indian Tea Workers into Submission - they need your help

Urgent Action 14-11-2009

Tata, the transnational Indian conglomerate whose Tetley Group makes the world famous Tetley teas, has taken 6,500 people hostage through hunger. Click here to send a message to Tata/Tetley!

The hostages are nearly 1,000 tea plantation workers and their families on the Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate in West Bengal, India. Permanently living on the edge of hunger, the workers and their dependants are being pushed to the edge of starvation through an extended lock out which has deprived them of wages for all but two days since the beginning of August. The goal of this collective punishment is to starve the workers into renouncing their elementary human rights, including the right to protest extreme abuse and exploitation.

The hostage-taking began with a first lockout on August 10, when workers protested the abusive treatment of a 22 year-old tea garden worker who was denied maternity leave and forced to continue work as a tea plucker despite being 8 months pregnant. On August 9, Mrs Arti Oraon collapsed in the field and was brought to the hospital, on a tractor, after the medical officer refused to make an ambulance available (he had proposed she be brought by bicycle). She was initially refused treatment, and only after her co-workers protested did she receive minimal care. Her treatment was inadequate and she had to be taken, in the same garbage tractor, to the local government hospital one hour away.

As news of her treatment spread, some 500 mostly female estate workers gathered in protest at the medical facility, demanding sanctions against the medical officer. Local management promised to meet with the workers, but on August 11 the management, along with the medical officer, left the estate and declared a lockout.

On August 27 an agreement was signed with three trade unions, representing some workers on the estate but not a majority, on reopening the garden. In the agreement, all workers' wages for the lockout period were withheld. The agreement included a clause that a "domestic inquiry" (an internal, company-controlled investigation) would be conducted. The agreement was written in English, a language few if any of the workers understand.

The garden was reopened the following day, although workers were not informed of the conditions of the reopening. On September 8, management issued letters of suspension and ordered a domestic

inquiry against eight workers.

None of the eight workers received a letter of notification. None of the eight had committed any act of violence or were involved in any illegal practice. These eight workers have been targeted because they are active in the garden campaigning for workers' rights.

At a September 10 meeting, management told the workers that suspension letters had been issued in accordance with the August 27 agreement and that opening the garden depended on compliance with that agreement. In other words: agree to the suspensions or you'll be locked-out again. Workers requested six days to respond to this ultimatum.

The ultimatum was a powerful one: tea garden wages are just 62.50 Indian rupees per day - the equivalent of USD 1.35 daily. One kilogram of the cheapest, poorest quality rice in the local market costs 20% of a worker's daily wage. Tea workers permanently live on the edge of hunger. The loss of wages for even a few weeks can tip them into starvation.

Although wielding the weapon of hunger - with workers' lives in the balance and the deadline to respond not yet expired - management on September 14 again left the plantation and implemented a lockout. This was the day workers were meant to receive their annual festival bonus, amounting to roughly two months wages. No bonus payments were made. Prior to the lockout, since the beginning of August workers have only received a wage payment amounting to two days work.

Following the closure, workers have sought to communicate with the management, requesting it to reopen the garden. The company has insisted that the garden will not be reopened and wages paid unless all workers accept the September 10 ultimatum to effectively sign off their right to protest abuses.

Tata Tea is a powerful global company; its wholly owned Tetley Tea is one of the world's biggest-selling tea brands. Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate is owned by Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited, a company 49.98% owned by Tata Tea. Tata and Amalgamated share the same office in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal. According to the Tata Tea 2009 annual report, Tata Tea Managing Director Percy T. Sigamporia earns in a single day roughly 1,000 times the daily wage of a Nowera Nuddy worker - assuming that worker is paid .

Tea from Amalgamated Plantations' tea estates goes into the famous Tetley Tea bags.

Tetley Tea is a member of the Ethical Tea Partnership (ETP), whose standard commits member companies to, among other requirements, ensure that there is no "harsh or inhumane treatment" of plantation workers and that "Workers should be paid at least monthly and should receive their pay on time." The actual conditions on the Nowera Nuddy estate, where workers are being subjected to brutal collective punishment, could not be more remote from this CSR wish list.

Workers at the Nowera Nuddy Tea Estate have formed an Action Committee which has called for the immediate reopening of the garden, the withdrawal of the suspension letters and no recriminations against workers, back payment of wages and rations since 14 September, immediate payment of the annual festival bonus and a management apology to Mrs Arti Oraon.

P.S.

* <http://cms.iuf.org/?q=node/180>

Footnotes

[1] See [Tata Group Escalates Repression Against Bengal Tea Workers](#)