

Farm Workers

Minimum Wages

THE wages of the 7.44 million farm labour force in Bihar, the second largest in the country, were recently raised by about 75 per cent. The new rate ranges between Rs 4 and Rs 5 plus one full or light meal.

Palamau will be the only district where the minimum wages will be Rs 4 plus a 500-gm light meal. For Patna, Bhojpur, Rohtas, East Champaran and West Champaran, the wages are Rs 5 for irrigated land and Rs 4.50 for non-irrigated land plus a full meal. In Monghyr, Bhagalpur and Santhal Parganas the rate is the same but there will be no meal. In the rest of Bihar the wage is Rs 4.50 plus a full or light meal. Women are to be paid equal wages for equal work in the whole of Bihar. The minimum wage for child workers has also been fixed — Rs 2.50 plus a 500-gm light meal — in the tribal-dominated districts of Giridih, Ranchi, Singhbhum and Dhanbad.

To relate wages to cost of living, the government wants employers to pay labourers wholly in staple foodgrains, such as paddy, rice, wheat and gram. The quantities equivalent to the minimum wage rate have been stipulated separately for all the districts.

The working day has been fixed for adult workers at nine hours, for adolescent workers at six hours and for children at four hours. The working hours have been fixed in accordance with by-law (1) of rule 24 of the Bihar Minimum Wages Act, 1951. An adult worker who toils for more than nine hours a day or 48 hours a week is entitled to get double wages for the extra work put in.

This is the second upward revision of agricultural wages in Bihar since they were fixed under Minimum Wages Act, 1948. Under the Act minimum wages were first fixed for Patna district in 1951 and by 1959 the whole state was declared as covered under the Act. The minimum wages were first revised in 1966-67 following the sharp rise in prices.

However, evidence provided by a number of surveys indicates that the minimum wages were not in fact enforced. According to one survey the average daily income of an agricultural labourer in Bihar in 1964-65 was Rs 1.39 — 31 paise in cash and Rs 1.08 in kind. Around that time the annual average income of agricultural labour households was Rs 600 (for those with

land) and Rs 614 (for the landless). A study conducted in the Santhal Parganas in 1974 found that the average daily income of a farm worker during the peak season was only Rs 1.25.

The state government set up a separate Directorate of Agricultural Labour on March 31, 1975, with a joint labour commissioner as its head. Prior to this a chief inspector of agricultural wages was in charge of the enforcement work. The chief inspector will continue to work in co-operation with the new Directorate.

Wage disputes at the district level are settled by the labour officers and at the block level by the labour inspectors. However, the labour inspectors were posted in only 114 of the 567 blocks in the state. It was only recently that in the remaining blocks the work of settling wage disputes was entrusted by the labour department to circle officers and welfare inspectors.

Minimum wage claim petitions were earlier heard by the labour officers and the subdivisional officers. For quick disposal of cases, the land reform deputy collectors (LRDCs) in all districts have also been now given arbitration authority. An advantage in requisitioning the services of LRDCs will be that they hold periodic camp courts in villages and that will help the farm workers to save the cost of travel to the district headquarters.

According to the Directorate of Agriculture Labour, altogether 2,300 minimum wages claim petitions are at present awaiting disposal with the labour officers and the subdivisional officers in Bihar. The Directorate concedes, of course, that this relatively small number of petitions does not by any means give an indication of the extent of breach of the minimum wages law.

To encourage the formation of farm labour unions under the Trade Unions Act, a Deputy Registrar of Trade Unions has been appointed to make possible the quick registration of such unions. A farm labour union can now get registered in a day or two. At present there are 31 registered farm workers' unions in Bihar. These are affiliated to different political parties and have a combined membership of not more than 5,000.

There are several other problems facing the agricultural worker which require urgent attention. For instance, as in other parts of the country, farm workers in Bihar suffer due to (a) seasonal employment (b) lack of welfare schemes and (c) indebtedness. According to an official survey, farm workers in the

state remain employed for only 175 days in a whole year. In the lean seasons without work, they get deeper and deeper into debt. Some of the workers move to the cities and pull rickshaws or tyre-carts, but their number is unlikely to exceed a few thousands.

Efforts to enable the farm workers to supplement their seasonal earnings and get year-round employment have had little impact. Schemes sponsored by the Bihar Rural Engineering Organisation, the Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Development Agency, the commercial banks and other agencies constitute only a drop in the ocean. The officials say that they are short of funds.

The result has been the growing poverty of agricultural labourers. They are forced to take consumption loans from the moneylenders, landowners and traders.

The rate of interest usually ranges between 30 per cent and 90 per cent per annum. To provide relief to the indebted harijans and scheduled castes and tribes, the Bihar government has declared them debt-free with effect from July 15, 1975. The number of farm workers who are expected to benefit from the decree is not known. The decree has been welcomed but will the landlords, moneylenders and traders reconcile themselves to it?

Wolf Ladejinsky

A M writes :

WOLF LADEJINSKY was much more than a desiccated agrarian expert. Such experts are legion; without them, foundations set up by multi-billionaires would face a problem of non-utilisation of resources. They come, write their report, go, and soon forget the country for which they had written it, their mental horizon is always coloured a cynical grey. Ladejinsky did not just write reports, he lived through them. He did not need, in his ripe old age, the trifle of the World Bank salary to keep coming to this country, base himself in an impersonalised hotel room in New Delhi, and restlessly wander across the Indian countryside to comprehend the essence of agrarian truth. It was bizarre, yet emotionally a moving experience, to see this near-octogenarian, who had lost the sight of practically both his eyes, who was in such a precarious state of health that he could hardly assimilate any food, still

determined to catch the plane, land on the airstrip in a distant town, and get into the jeep or station wagon, or take the ferry across the river, so as to reach some remote village where the *bataidar* would be able to tell him a little bit more about the mystique of the local land system, or of the local wage rates. This was no run-of-the-mill technical expert, this was a zealot. And the zeal came from a deep love for people, whatever their civilisation or the pigmentation of their skin.

Yet Wolf Ladejinsky was no ideologue. He would not have minded being described as a old-world liberal, who takes it as his mission to analyse and state the truth, whatever its hue. Thus he could be of considerable service to General McArthur in Japan in 1946; the Shah of Iran too called for him, and the State Department, in the late 1950s — before it lost its head completely over Vietnam —, also thought that he could render some good to the authorities in Saigon with his advice and counsel. Ladejinsky did not stint on his advice, but he did not stint on telling the truth, either. Thus, in the Indian milieu, he could say things — and be heard with respect — which the establishment would not be prepared to hear from others: things about Bihar's medieval feudalism, about the Green Revolution stifled three-quarters the way in Punjab and Haryana, about the agony of Bengal's deprived share-croppers and landless labour, about the real nature of famine relief in Maharashtra. Laud reform, he could say in his quaint American-heavily-tinged-with-Russian accent, was nine-tenths political will, and where there is a will there is a way, and not just legislation.

He was no ideologue — one cannot in any case afford to be one once one accepts World Bank sponsorship —, but he was not afraid of ideas either.

And he knew how to bestow affection. Never very demonstrative, he would still make his little gestures, and there could be no mistaking the depth of his goodwill. An admirer of this journal, he would, every now and then, drop one an appreciative note about some altogether insignificant piece one might have written. It calls for a special genre of faith in humanity to assert that, whatever the circumstances, howsoever unmitigatedly unfavourable the objective conditions in the short run, a people — any people — are capable of lifting themselves through a revolutionary upsurge. Wolf

Ladejinsky held such faith, and he tried hard to convert others to it. As one mourns for him, one does not just mourn for a great American, one also mourns for a great romantic, who had wizened with the years, but who refused to forsake either hope or love.

Clippings

A committee is being set up under the chairmanship of Dr V M Dandekar, Director, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Poona, to ascertain why the small landholders in Maharashtra do not take advantage of loans from district central co-operative banks. Giving this information to newsmen, the Chief Minister, Mr S B Chavan, said that according to Reserve Bank directions, co-operative banks were required to provide 20 per cent of their total loans to, small holders in rural areas. However, these banks had pointed out that most of the small landholders in the state did not approach them for loans at all, he said.

The Financial Express, July 17.

The CPI Central Executive Committee has abandoned its movement for the occupation of surplus land. Instead, it will join a nationwide mass movement for the speedy implementation of the new economic programme announced by the Prime Minister.

The Statesman, July 6.

The CPI youth wing, Paschim Banga Yuba Sangha, has approached the Youth Congress with a proposal for a joint campaign for implementation of the schemes in the 21-point economic programme relating to youths.

The Statesman, July 17.

Elections to students' unions in all educational institutions throughout Andhra Pradesh have been banned with immediate effect. Announcing this, the Education Minister, Mr M V Krishna Rao, told newsmen that instructions were being issued to the vice-chancellors of the universities and authorities of government colleges and high schools in this regard. The minister said it has been decided to nominate students' councils for encouraging sports, national service scheme and library associations.

The Times of India, July 16.

The Bihar government has decided to separate generation of power from the State Electricity Board and put the entire generation under the charge of army personnel, according to Chief Minister, Jagannath Mishra.

The Hindustan Times, July 12.

The Union Government is now said to be favourably inclined towards diversion of selected SEEPZ (Santa Cruz Electronic Export Processing Zone) pro-

ducts to the home market which are being imported by industrial units at present.

The Financial Express, July 19.

New Delhi, July 5: The Indonesian Navy will hold joint exercises with Indian Navy in Indian waters some time early next year, Admiral R S Subyacto, Chief of the Indonesian Naval Staff said here today, reports PTI. Admiral Subyacto, who is on a six-day visit to the country at the invitation of Admiral S N Kohli, Chief of Naval Staff, said Indonesia attached great importance to establishing closer co-operation between the navies of the two countries. He said the first joint naval exercise by the two countries was held in Indonesian waters last year and it was highly successful in bringing the two navies closer. The two navies were now organising the proposed exercises, he said.

The Statesman, July 6.

The CBI today sought in the court of Mr O P Singla, special judge, Delhi, to drop the charge of criminal conspiracy in taking gratification or the exercise of personal influence with a public servant against Tulmohan Ram, MP, and two other accused in the Pondicherry import licence scandal case.

The Times of India, July 19.

The INTUC-led National Union of Plantation Workers, CPI(M)-led Darjeeling Zilla Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union and the Gorkha League-controlled Darjeeling Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha have accepted a wage increase of 25 paise a day for adult workers and 12 paise for child workers with effect from July 7 though the Wage Fixing Committee had allowed an increase of 45 paise and 22.5 paise respectively for the two categories, says UNI.

Business Standard, July 18.

The Genetic Control of Mosquito Unit (GCMU), wound up on Monday following the withdrawal of the World Health Organisation (WHO) from the project, is to be continued under a new name, but is in a state of suspense, pending the decision of the government on the entire project. This was disclosed here today by the Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Dr C Gopalan. During the interim period of suspension, the project will be called the Vector Control Research Centre (VCRG) and will function in two parts, one in Delhi and another in Pondicherry. The laboratory division will be located in Delhi, while the field station will be in Pondicherry.

The Hindu, July 4.