

Regional News

The strike commenced on Monday, with workers saying they have not been paid for four months.

BY HILLARY TWINAMATSIKO

Operations at the historic Igara Growers Tea Factory Limited have been halted after hundreds of employees staged a sit-down strike over unpaid salaries. The workers claim they have not been paid for four months now.

The strike, which began on Monday, has left the factory floor silent and workers redundant and threatens to collapse Ankole Sub-region's tea supply chain.

Igara Growers Tea Factory Limited is one of the largest tea processing plants in the area and was established in the 1970s.

The protesting workers said they have not received pay since November last year. Some of the workers say they have since been evicted by landlords, while others lamented that their children have not returned to school for First Term, which commenced last month.

Mr Joseph Barugahare, an employee, noted that while the factory continues to load tea on trucks for sale, management claims there is no money for wages.

"Landlords have chased us out, and banks are taking our property. We do not know what to do anymore," he said on Monday.

Mr Paddy Twesigomwe, the trade secretary in charge of the tea sector, revealed that the factory has failed to remit workers' National Social Security Fund (NSSF) contributions since 2022, an amount he said has now exceeded Shs1.5 billion.

"Workers are losing interest. We have given management and the board a 14-day ultimatum to meet and provide a clear roadmap for payment," he said.

Mr Dickson Tumukunde, an IT officer from the Buhweju branch, stated that

Workers' strike paralyses Igara factory operations



Workers strike at Igara Tea factory in Bushenyi District on Monday. PHOTO/ HILLARY TWINAMATSIKO

WAY FORWARD

Ms Loyce Atukwasa, the Bushenyi District labour officer, said leaders would meet the board of the factory to come up with an amicable

solution.

"It is very unfortunate as it violates employment laws. Management says there is no money at the moment, but people worked and they were not paid," she said.

the factory has lost its integrity.

When contacted, the General Manager of Igara Tea factory, Mr Robert Ayebare declined to comment since it was a workers strike. "If you needed comments, you should talk to those who are striking."

Board Chairman Samuel Muhereza had not responded to our repeated calls to his known number by press time.

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"It is very unfortunate as it violates employment laws. Management says there is no money at the moment, but people worked and they were not paid," she said.

Ms Atukwasa added: "Since there is currently no green leaf being processed and workers are redundant, the only way forward is a high-level meeting with the Board of Directors within the next two weeks to have this sorted out."

The workers, however, blame Bushenyi leaders for not doing much to ensure their grievances are addressed. Some vowed to vote out some of the political leaders in the 2031 General Elec-

tion. "We are in a lot of pain. Our children didn't even get their third-term reports last year because of unpaid fees. We have leaders like [Local Government] Minister Raphael Magyezi in this region, but they only run to us during elections. When we are in danger like this, they are nowhere to be seen," Mr Franco Turyahabwe, a factory worker said.

He added: "We are going to wait for them, and this time we will treat them the same way they treated us when we needed their help. We are surprised that the political leadership of this region is not helping us at all."

In his response, Minister Magyezi, who is also the former legislator for Igara West in Bushenyi, yesterday said: "They [workers] have leaders at the factory and am not the leader in the area, the area has church leaders, mosque leaders, community leaders, political leaders but they should work on their leaders of the factory to resolve the issues. And I'm not the minister of tea factories. I'm the minister of Local Government and that is not local government matter."

"When I was a director in that tea factory, there was no such confusion. So, they should sit down with leaders of the factory to resolve their matter," he added.

Other challenges

Mr Julius Mutahunga, a shareholder in Igara Tea factory, said: "On average, Buhweju branch of Igara tea factory, farmers would bring in green leaf of about 120,000 kgs and Igara tea factory Kyamuhunga branch farmers would bring in 80,000 kgs so in total it would be like 210,000 kgs per day. Then made to be around 25,000 to 30,000 kg daily.

It's true the factory was no longer receiving tea leaves from farmers as they were getting little but the money they would receive from the market with factory leadership would use it in a bad way because they have lots of debts as they have been paying little by little to the banks then they use the balance in an appropriate way. Even if the issue of salaries is resolved, we need to purchase new machinery."