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Suriname

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By Ivan Cairo, Correspondent at Caribbean Net News Suriname

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PARAMARIBO, Suriname: Banana workers in Suriname are threatening strike if their newly established union is not recognised by the management of the state-owned Foundation for Preservation of the Banana Sector (SBBS), union leaders have announced.

The Nickerie Banana Workers Union (BABN) is seeking recognition to start negotiation for better working condition and wages, BABN president Dayanand Dwarka told reporters after a meeting with the workers.

Meanwhile the trade union has sent a second letter to the SBBS-management after the first communications to be invited for a courtesy call, which was sent on January 29, went unanswered. The union has meanwhile put forward a two-week ultimatum to the company.

"We sent another letter to the SBBS-management for a meeting and if we are not invited before the deadline expires, we cannot guarantee that operations won't be interrupted," said Dwarka. He continued, saying that the union is not seeking confrontation, but trying to arrange better working conditions which will also benefit the company.

"The workers are being confronted with several issues including extended working hours without payment for extra duty or even without food," said the trade unionist. What is especially troubling said Dwarka, is that is that those violations are happening in a state-owned company. He emphasized that Suriname signed and ratified the ILO Conventions, but still the SBBS is violating these conventions and the national labor acts.

"The country has signed the ILO Conventions in which the fundamental rights of workers are incorporated and when a state-owned company is violating these principles, we can never accept that," the union leader maintained.

According to Robby Berenstein, president of the C-47 association of trade unions, who was also present at the meeting, said that the association is supporting the workers in their actions. Berenstein said that if in any case the banana workers go on strike they will get full support from the association since "this is a fundamental worker's right".

"They have the right to establish a trade union which should be recognized by the employer. It's a fundamental right which is also included in the Constitution," the unionist argued.

Recently, SBBS manager Anand Ramkisoensing said that currently millions of dollars are being invested in the company to guarantee its viability and sustainability. Starting in 2002 the government and the European Union invested several millions in a restructuring programme, which should ultimately result in privatisation of the sector.

While banana production in 2006 was 46,500 tonnes, production in 2007 increased to 60,000 tonnes, Ramkisoensing disclosed. In 2008 production and export is expected to increase further to over 70,000 tonnes.

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E-mail: natlaw@natlaw.com