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wages on time, migrant workers in Chennai share tales of woe

Eight migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have been forced to run from pillar to post as they struggle to survive in a city whose language is alien and with just one meal a day.



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Migrant workers from UP and Bihar display their identity cards in front of the construction site where they work, at Mogappair in Chennai. (Photo | Debadatta Mallick, EPS)

By C Shivakumar

Express News Service

CHENNAI: Denied their salaries and threatened with dire consequences by their contractor if they approach anyone, eight migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have been forced to run from pillar to post as they struggle to survive in city whose language is alien and with just one meal a day.

Thirty-four-year-old Sunil Kumar, from Maharajganj Zilla in Uttar Pradesh, who came to Chennai during the lockdown in August on a bus hired by Gayathri Constructions, says, "We came here through our sub-contractor Joginder, who runs the company Siddhi Vinayak. A total of 36 workers came here during the period."

He said that Joginder paid him for August and September, following which the contract was shifted to another sub-contractor working for Gayathri Constructions, who has not paid him since October.

"They haven't paid me for four months,"

Sunil said, adding that another worker's salary has been pending since November, and six workers haven't been paid for two months. Besides them, many workers who weren't paid returned to their hometowns, Sunil alleged.

They struggled to approach the authorities as they don't know Tamil.

"We went to the police commissioner's office to complain, but it was a futile attempt. Later, we tried meeting the sub-contractor who threatened and warned us against approaching the police or media," said Sunil.

He added that he has a 17-month-old child, a wife and parents to feed in Uttar Pradesh.

"Life has been difficult since the lockdown. We came hoping to send money home. What are they going to do with a poor man's wages? We are just asking to be paid for the work we did," Sunil asserted.

With hardly any cash in hand, the workers have also been struggling to get food. "We eat just once a day. At times, we get hungry but have no option," says Guddu Kumar, from Gaya in Bihar.

When *The New Indian Express* reached out to one Jayesh, whom the workers said is part of the management of the sub-contractor, he said they had given the money to the previous sub-contractor.

When contacted, the previous subcontractor, Joginder, refuted the allegation.

Later, Jayesh said the payment is due for December and January. A project manager of Gayathri Constructions, Nirmal Kumar, said the workers approached him a week ago and he promised to resolve their issue.

"The salary of only one worker is pending for one month, and another worker has to receive Rs 7,000 for the month of November. For six other workers, we have to pay the salaries for only December and January," Kumar said.

However, the workers had a different tale to tell.

Sunil alleged he asked the sub-contractor in December for his pending salary, and was threatened.

"We don't have hope. Nirmal asked us for a list of people who didn't get the salaries by 6 pm. He claimed the salaries will be given by 9 pm on Monday. When we said that others who left for their native places also didn't get paid, he brushed it aside," said Sunil.

The policemen present at the spot told Sunil to ask the workers to file a report with the police and their pending salaries will be provided.

Later, Nirmal said that the salaries will be paid by 9 pm. The Labour department is also looking into the issue, said an official.

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