

Workers lose precious wage hours in queues

TNN | Nov 19, 2016, 03.09 AM IST



NEW DELHI: Kumar, a construction worker, has finally got his wages after six months. The problem is his contractor gave him a cheque instead of the usual cash. On Friday, he stood in a queue in Nehru Place, trying to get the desperately needed money. He was there with four other visibly tired workers still awaiting their turn despite having joined the queue at 9am.

Like Kumar, 12 people working under the supervision of Vijay for a contractor too have been given cheques and asked to encash them at a bank in Saket. The group comes to Saket from Chhattarpur around 10am and stands in the line till 12 noon. For two days now, they have returned empty-handed after the bank said it had no cash. "The workers don't have bank accounts here, and therefore have to stand in the queues," Vijay said

of the labourers' predicament. "These people don't even have money for food." As his workers look to him for direction, he tells them sternly not to return to work until they get their money.

But time spent at the bank means precious wage hours lost. "Do you know how much we earn? Only Rs 2,200 per month. On top of that, my salary has come to me almost 10 days late, and I have had to spend two days here to get it encashed," said an agitated Mehek, a cleaner working under Vijay. A shorter women's line got her to the teller earlier than her male fellow workers.

Mehek has her complaints about the bankers, but her anger is reserved for the government. She is annoyed that people like her, who have always struggled for money, are being harassed by the ill-planned demonetisation exercise. "The PM should have thought about all of this before making us run around like this," railed Mehek. "We are losing earnings to get our own money.

The workers are also spending scanty resources on travel — it costs around Rs 60 for a one-way trip to the Saket bank from Chhattarpur. Vijay said, "Our cheques have been issued on a bank so far away. We asked our contractor to help get us cash, but he told us to open accounts here." Then looking at the milling crowd, he added, "Who has the time open accounts for us?"

Vijay said that once this set of people got some cash, he would come with the next six. Let work suffer if it must, he declared. Saying that the poor were being hassled for the misdeeds of the rich, the labour supervisor said the contractors would only wake up to the existence of a real problem only when they found workers weren't able to report for work.