

MUMBAI

## Municipal contract workers demand equal wages



### SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MUMBAI: JANUARY 07, 2017 00:48 IST

UPDATED: JANUARY 07, 2017 00:48 IST

Jawaharlal Nehru University student leader Kanhaiya Kumar and Dalit youth leader from Gujarat Jignesh Mewani on Friday addressed a crowd of hundreds of contract cleaning workers from Mumbai and around Maharashtra at a protest to address these workers not being paid minimum wages.

#### List of demands

At an event organised in Azad Maidan, the workers, under the banner of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), demanded staff jobs with equal wages and benefits, the eradication of the

contract system and the immediate payment of arrears of the minimum wages they are entitled to. They said the arrears of the last 22 months per worker range from Rs. 1,10,000 in Mumbai to Rs. 1,60,000 in other parts of the State.

A statement released by the organisers said, "Sweeping of roads and lifting of garbage is the statutory duty of the municipal councils and corporations and this is a perennial activity and therefore should not be given on contract basis. This perennial activity, whether as permanent employee or contract employee is done only by the Dalits."

The statement said that though the government of Maharashtra had announced minimum wages of Rs. 14,000 for such municipal workers on February 25, 2015, till date, this had not been implemented. The State has more than 35,000 such contract '*safai*' workers and each are entitled to massive benefits, since according to the Minimum Wages Act and Payment of Wages Act, paying less than minimum wage attracts a fine of 10 times the amount not paid.

The statement said that the Labour Ministry had asked all municipal corporations to pay minimum wages and arrears before Diwali but no action had been taken. In October 2015, the *safai* workers had also approached the governor of Maharashtra who had written to the Chief



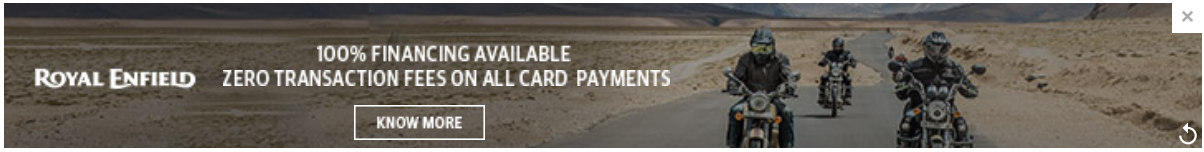
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#### 'A token gesture'

Addressing the gathering, Jignesh Mewani, a social activist, lawyer, and a former member of the Aam Aadmi Party, said that while the Central government had sought many photo opportunities to promote the Swachh Bharat campaign, with stars like Amitabh Bachhan and Hema Malini, their failure to address the needs of the real people who cleaned up our cities and could actually ensure a cleaner India showed that it was just a token gesture. He said that the work of sweeping and cleaning garbage is strongly associated with caste and that the government should come up with a way and means to ensure that these workers are able to lead better lives and give the next generation a chance to get into a better profession.

#### 'Spend time with people'

Kanhaiya Kumar, who spoke last and was met with a rousing reception, echoed these thoughts. "The government has come up with a fancy campaign called Swachh Bharat but if they really want to understand what Swachh Bharat is they should come and spend time with the people who actually make it happen day after day and understand their troubles and concerns."



Printable version | Jan 8, 2017 10:47:11 PM |

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