

# We are not lazy – workers

*The municipality is playing the workers like chess pawns ...*

**PATSY BEANGSTROM**  
NEWS EDITOR

THE 378 workers employed in the Mayoral Cleaning Project say they are not lazy and are instead the heart of the municipality but are being paid peanuts.

The workers yesterday indicated that they were not part of the Department of Public Works' Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) but were employed in the Mayoral Cleaning Project.

The provincial organiser of the South African Liberated Public Sectors Workers Union (Salipswa), Thapelo Thole, said yesterday that the workers were demanding the implementation of the Basic Conditions of Employment, including a minimum wage of R3 500 a month.

"Currently those employed in the Mayoral Cleaning Project are earning R90 a day, which is R1 900 a month. The co-ordinators, however, received an increase and earn R7 500," said Thole.

The workers said that while they did all the work, they did not receive a living wage.

According to the workers, they embarked on a strike about two weeks ago. "After that, we received our contracts, which are valid for one year until June 2019, as well as uniforms, but none of our other demands have been met."

They pointed out that, in terms of their contract, they were required to work from 7am until 3pm from Monday to Friday. There is no indication on the contract of leave days or when they should take their lunch breaks.

"Although the contract states that we start work at 7am, we are required to clock in at 6am at the ABC Cemetery."

Thole said that the workers decided among themselves when they should take their breaks. "Some might stop from 10am to 11am, while others might take from 11am to midday. To outsiders, it might seem that there are groups of people not working but they could be on their lunch breaks."

According to Thole, the workers were informed yesterday that they would not be paid for the two weeks that they were on strike.

"Currently there is a lot of uncertainty regarding the time-sheets. The programme manager is withholding the time-sheets so that they do not have to pay the workers for those two weeks. However, we have tried to meet with the municipality as well as Coghsta to discuss our demands and grievances, which include the implementation of the basic wage as well as absorption into the municipality. We also want the minimum wage to be backdated to June. This is not negotiable."

He added that the mayor was due to meet the workers. "The union and representatives of the workers will meet the mayor at 9am on Tuesday morning (today). We are ready to embark on industrial action if our demands are not met. The municipality is threatening the workers and we cannot, as a union, condone this. We put it to the municipality directly, we are coming for them. They must clear this mess. As a union we are ready to assist our members."

He added that this was not a political battle but a labour issue. "The municipality is playing the workers like chess pawns. They want to create dissent among the workers so that they clash among themselves."

One of the workers said yesterday that she had been working on the project for three years already. "On one occasion I hurt myself but I was told that I could not claim injured on duty. However, the supervisor is able to claim. People are being treated differently."

Other workers pointed out that they clean the streets and that municipal workers "come behind us and sweep here and there."

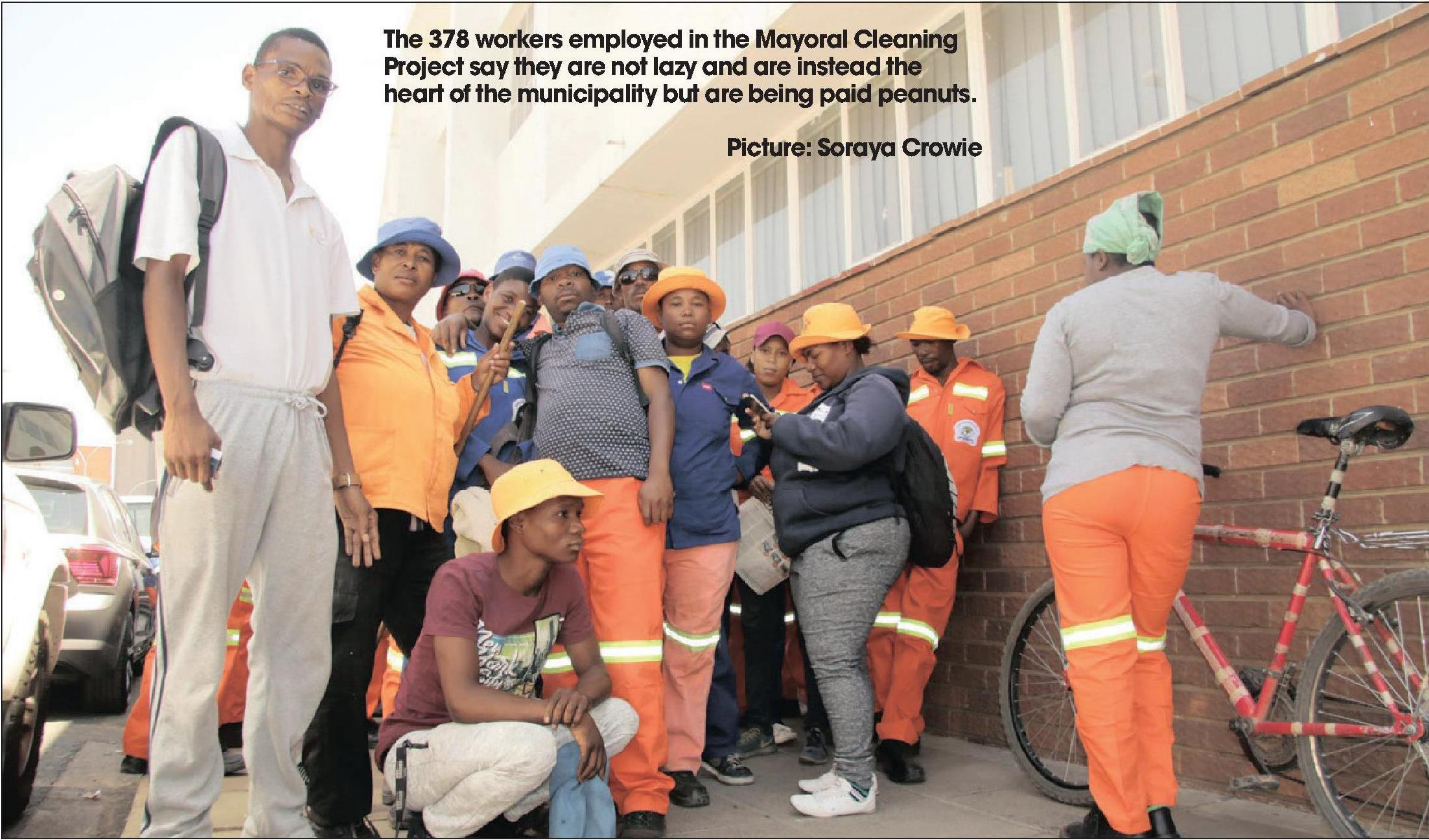
She added that they were also expected to clean up the Oppenheimer Gardens "even though it falls under the municipality's parks and gardens section".

"It is so dirty there. We even have to pick up human faeces."

The workers stated that they wanted to clean. "However, we must be paid a living wage. The R1 900 we currently earn is nothing. The government gave a R2 a day increase to EPWP workers. What difference does R2 make? Everything is going up and we must look after our children, our parents, pay

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**Picture: Soraya Crowie**



insurance and buy food. This kind of salary will not reduce poverty. We are being exploited," one worker pointed out. "We are also not part of the EPWP but are employed under the Mayoral Cleaning Project but our rights as workers are being violated."

"The municipality must not undermine us," another said.

Municipal spokesperson, Sello Matsie, said yesterday that the municipality had been part of the EPWP since it was launched in 2004 to empower unemployed South Africans with skills and to serve as an avenue for labour absorption and income transfers to poor households in the short to medium term.

"The wages are also set at a national level. We have absorbed as and when vacancies are available and workers are encouraged to apply for such positions. We absolutely respect their rights within the workplace and the workers have played a significant role when they have been deployed."

He added that this may not be noticeable because as soon as an area was cleaned, "society just starts again with illegal dumping".

"Any matters the workers wish to raise will be internally handled through labour relations procedures."

He added that at no stage did the municipality threaten any of the workers.

Matsie stated further that all EPWP workers had been appointed on a contract basis until the end of June 2019. "The contract clearly states that this is an EPWP contract," he said.

Matsie stated further that the municipality had a meeting with EPWP workers at the Social Centre on November 2, which was attended by the current executive mayor, Pule Thabane, and other councillors.

"The following points were discussed and explained: the purpose of the EPWP programme which is a national government poverty alleviation project; identifying of EPWP workers per ward; the payment of workers and their contracts; who determines their income per day; the injured on duty; no work no pay; time-sheets; toilet facilities at projects; personal protective equipment; respect between managers and workers; absenteeism from work; workers under the influence of alcohol while on duty; the safety of workers when working in the streets; and attendance registers."

He added that following the discussions, the workers were issued with their personal protective equipment.

"An induction programme has been arranged for all EPWP workers at the Social Centre. Topics that will be dealt with include leave, sick leave, unauthorised stay aways from work, no work no pay, injuries on duty, disciplinary processes, and being under the influence of alcohol."

The programme is due to take place today. "The municipality is busy procuring the services of mobile toilets to be used by EPWP workers when working on projects."

"All co-ordinators will also undergo a basic first aid course and will be issued with a first aid bag to treat minor injuries while waiting for an ambulance."