

How did we end up with so many illegal foreign workers? What is the long-term solution?

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A word from the President

Illegal Foreign Workers Outnumber Legal Ones by About Two Million

Last month, when we read media reports on the increasing number of cases of COVID-19 among foreign workers, the number of foreign workers in the country was revealed. According to reports, there are about 2 million documented foreign workers and between 3-4 million undocumented ones. I wish to thank Prof Jayakumar for also highlighting this in the May issue of Berita MMA.

If you are trying to imagine the size of a 4 million population, well it is roughly the entire population of the state of Johor (which is around 3.7 million), which is the closest comparison I could find online for this purpose.

In certain countries, these figures would have made the front pages with people demanding answers from the government. Some heads might have even rolled. But it wasn't the case here. There wasn't much alarm about these figures at all. Not even for the fact that we will have to test around 6 million foreign workers in total for COVID-19 as foreign workers have been identified as a target group for screening. Perhaps Malaysians had other worries on their minds at the time.

How on earth did we end up with more undocumented/illegal migrant workers than documented workers?

About two million more! I think any right thinking person would have panicked at even a hundred. But all seems to be calm in Malaysia.

To be fair, there were some suggestions made to offer amnesty and legalise these undocumented migrants so that they could come forward to be tested without any fear of the authorities. There were also some suggestions to repatriate them back to their home country, those who tested negative for COVID-19. I do believe some arrangements are being made for some of the workers to be sent home. But what is the long-term solution? The issue of undocumented foreign workers is not new and we have more than enough experience dealing with the problem. Surely there is a more effective way to manage these issues.

We must insist on more accountability from the powers that be and relevant government agencies should set KPIs to ensure the number of undocumented foreign workers remains low. Well, at least lower than documented workers.

We were made to understand that even detaining these workers costs a lot of money (taxpayer's money!) which is estimated at RM70 per person per day. Tighter monitoring will also be needed at our borders, and enforcement against employers hiring them and irresponsible middlemen or agents in the foreign labour sector.

New shift system needs more in-depth study before implementation

Aside from this, we should also not neglect our obligations to care for these workers because as long as they are in our country, they are our responsibility. I sincerely hope that more engagement will be held between government, NGOs and various stakeholders to, once and for all, find a permanent solution.

Commercialised COVID-19 Screenings

MMA had issued a strongly worded press statement last month, against the commercialising of COVID-19 screening. COVID-19 screenings were openly being marketed online by certain 'middle men' with no action being taken by the authorities. We were shocked to learn of how these commercialised screenings were even allowed without proper protocols being followed. In the statement, we urged MOH to make public all their audits on laboratories and on how the tests are being conducted.

New Shift System at Government Health Clinics

MMA also issued a press statement on the new shift system that was to begin at government clinics (starting 15 June 2020) in phases. In the statement, MMA had called for an increase in staff and much needed improvements to infrastructure before the implementation of the shift system. We also urged MOH to conduct a more in-depth study before implementing the move as most clinics were not ready for the change.

Under the new system, clinic hours will be extended to 9.30pm, Mondays-Fridays on two shifts – from 8.00am-5.00pm and 12.30pm-9.30pm. In a research conducted by MMA with 9,320 respondents (mostly *Klinik Kesihatan* staff), 92% disagreed with the new shift system.

Around 84% said it would increase their current workload and 89% said it would increase their work-related stress thus eventually leading to burnout. In another online poll conducted by Public Health Malaysia, 63% voted against the current move.



MMA President presenting a souvenir to CUEPACS President Tuan Haji Adnan Mat



MMA President receiving a cheque from Medisavers COO Sam Tang for their donation to MMA Foundation for the COVID-19 Fund



MMA, CUEPACS, MPS, MBK met to discuss the shift system to be implemented at government health clinics

A joint press statement with the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services (CUEPACS), the Malaysian Pharmaceutical Society (MPS), the Malaysian Nurses Association (MNA), the Malaysian Nurses Union (MNU), and the *Kesatuan Pemandu-Pemandu Kementerian Kesihatan Semenanjung Malaysia* (KPPKSM) was also issued the next day to the media.

Finally, I wish to take this opportunity to wish all those celebrating their birthdays in July, a Happy Birthday!

To all colleagues, stay safe and keep up the good work! BMMA