

# Bosses warn of project delays without foreign workers

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Malaysian Employers Federation says prices of produce from small farms may go up if there is a labour crunch.



Malaysian Employers Federation foresees project delays from a lack of workers.

PETALING JAYA: Construction companies and small farms are among businesses which will suffer after the government ends rehiring of undocumented foreign workers, says the Malaysian Employers Federation.

Speaking to FMT, the federation's executive director, Shamsuddin Bardan, said projects might be delayed and developers might incur penalties for late delivery because of any labour shortage.

Consumers might pay more for their vegetables if small farms lack workers, he said.

Shamsuddin supported the government's decision to take stern action against illegal foreign workers, "but if the system of hiring legal workers is difficult and expensive, some employers may take chances and resort to hiring those without proper papers who might be available in big numbers.

"It is estimated that for every one legal foreign worker, there will be about 2 or 3 illegal foreign workers, and not all illegals are employed," he said. Many of them operated businesses in shopping complexes and other premises.

Earlier, Home Minister Muhyiddin Yassin announced that the government's rehiring programme for undocumented workers would be terminated. "We should not legalise what is illegal," he said.

Shamsuddin said illegal workers should be repatriated immediately instead of being held in detention centres at a cost to the government of about RM75 per day each.

He also suggested “rebranding” some lowly jobs to make them more attractive to Malaysians.

“For instance, no local wants to be labelled a cleaner or sweeper, so we can rebrand such jobs as environmental assistant to make them more socially acceptable. Employees also needed to gain skills to perform such jobs, which may involve operation of sophisticated machines.

“Such skills need to be certified. There is an urgent need to link wages of local employees with certified skills,” he said.

Shamsuddin urged the government to make the process of employing foreign workers clearer and less expensive.

He said the policy kept changing and was often based on knee-jerk reactions, and employers were not given enough time to adjust.

Employers also ended up paying more every time the government contracted out some of the processes.

“For example, in the rehiring programme, employers had to go through three appointed service providers and were forced to pay extra for services which should have been provided by the Immigration Department,” he said.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress president Abdul Halim Mansor urged the government to give priority to Malaysians, especially those from learning centres registered under the National Service.

He said foreign worker agencies should be shut down “because the way they operated is more akin to human trafficking”.

He said MTUC had long criticised the employment of foreign workers as it led to social problems. However, irresponsible employers preferred them because they provided cheaper labour.

Malaysia had enough manpower, he said. “We have a 3.7% unemployment rate but we have 1.5 million documented foreign workers and about 1.5 million foreign workers without documents,” he added.

There should be a requirement for employers to seek approval from the Human Resources Ministry before hiring foreign workers.