

# "I Have Friends Who Are On The Dean's List But Have Yet To Get A Job", Former Cleaner Tells M'sians About '3D' Jobs

Written by Teh Wei



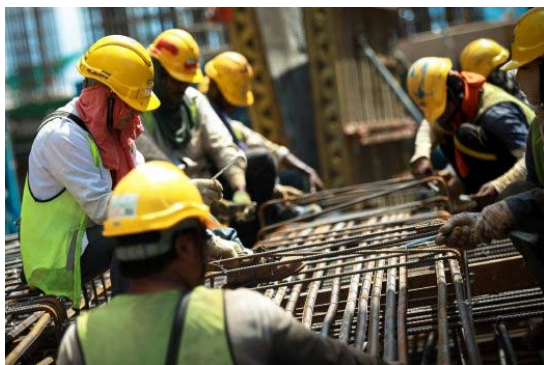
**LAST** Monday, it was reported that employers in the country are still in dark over conflicting announcements on the hiring of foreign workers – leaving employers scratching their heads and complaining that the severe shortages might lead to business losses.

Responding to this, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said new workers had been arriving in Malaysia to fill critical shortages following an intake freeze in February and companies were thus confused as to whether the ban was still on.

Shamsuddin said employers had started applying for new workers since news reports emerged in May about a lifting of the freeze on hiring of such foreigners in the manufacturing, construction, plantation and furniture sectors.

To recap, the then Immigration director-general Datuk Seri Sakib Kusmi said earlier that the Government would only ease the ban after its five-month rehiring programme for illegal foreign workers concluded on June 30 this year.

On June 1, the Home Ministry announced it would not lift the blanket ban on foreign workers until it was convinced that employers, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), stopped using agents and took full responsibility of their workers' welfare.



"There seemed to be different policy consideration. Many bosses are not sure if they can apply for new foreign workers," Shamsuddin said, stressing that it was time for the Government to make clear its hiring policy on new foreign workers so everyone is clear.

It is also understood that these employers had resorted to source countries to recruit workers in view of the need to fill critical shortages as a result of the intake freeze in February, which reportedly led to RM24bil in losses.

Looking at the bigger picture, do we have to face the fact that there are some jobs Malaysians simply don't want to do.

Take for example, Americans complaining about Mexican and Asian immigrants taking over their jobs which US employers say no local wants or UK employers accusing British workers of being afraid of hard work when they complain of being overtaken by cheap labour provided by Eastern European immigrants.

Are we heading in the same direction?

To find out, *Malaysian Digest* spoke to the employers' federation, national trade union centre as well as a fresh graduate who is willing to take up a '3Ds' job as they shared their views on the matter.

### Elementary Occupations Need Rebranding To Attract More Locals – MEF

There is no escaping the fact that Malaysian workers don't want to empty your garbage can. They don't want to wash your cars or serve you at the local mamak eatery. They won't build the house you dwell in, or tidy up the hotel room you sleep in, or serve you the food in the restaurant.

In fact, Malaysians can't even be counted on construction works and many other menial jobs. It is not an overstatement to say that our workers have grown soft – young people simply don't want to work certain jobs, and the unemployed don't want to do much of anything strenuous these days.

Contacted by *Malaysian Digest* to comment on the matter, Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan (*pic*) said the negative stigma attached to elementary occupations is the main reason most Malaysians are not taking up those jobs.

"The negative perception among Malaysians towards menial jobs such as cleaners, waiters, domestic helpers, labourers and service workers has led to the unwillingness among the locals to be employed in those positions.

"Oftentimes we create an impression that those jobs are not attractive. Sadly, it turns out to be the fact especially in terms of remuneration and benefit packages. Besides, most of the times those jobs are demanding and offer lower pay," he asserted.

Shamsuddin, when asked how the Government can reverse the situation in order to attract more locals into elementary occupations, remarked: "In fact, we have been discussing with the Ministry of Human Resources (MHR) about this issue but they have yet to rebrand these occupations and relook into the salary package and image of elementary occupations in the country."

"We must revolutionize way we run the business. Employers should give more prominence towards skilled workers and increase the use of technology. This does not only help to reduce the number of employees but it will help to increase the rates of pay," he quipped.

Elaborating, he noted: "Elementary occupations in general have branding problem. Most Malaysians still think of menial jobs such as cleaner, domestic helper, farmers, and sanitationers are jobs only for the poor and lower class group. To solve this problem, rebranding is of utmost importance.



Shamsuddin asserted that the negative stigma attached to elementary occupations is the main reason most Malaysians are not taking up those jobs, and they need rebranding in order to attract more locals.

"A good example is that we used to call the person who prepare food in the restaurant as 'cook' previously but now people highly regard the profession and call it as 'chef'. The same goes to bus drivers and garbage collectors, people in some countries now call them as 'bus captain' and 'sanitary engineer' respectively," he said.

Shamsuddin further stressed: "Ask most Malaysians if they wish to work as a security guard or waiter and I firmly believe most of them, if not all, are not interested. Therefore, we need to do a better job defining what those jobs mean in today's world. There is no doubt that most Malaysians care about more than just taking home a paycheck."

"They care about working at an organization which makes an impact, and sees them as more than cogs in the greater machine. Hence, it is high time for the Government to rebrand those elementary jobs if we want to attract more locals into the jobs," he added.

### **"It's Untrue To Say That Malaysians Are Lazy And Scared By Hard Work"**

With the unemployment rate on an increasing trend each year, there is undoubtedly pressure for the jobs to go to local workers. But are jobless Malaysians prepared to do the sort of work that in recent years has become dominated by foreign workers from our neighbouring countries?

That said, defenders of the current business climate would be quick to argue that Malaysian local workforce are lazy and it makes financial sense to the bottom line to hire foreign workers, particularly in terms of productivity. Is it acceptable to say that foreign workers are cheaper and this makes them more attractive for local employers?

In an interview with *Malaysian Digest*, Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) secretary-general N Gopal Kishnam (*pic*) said that it is unfair to label Malaysian workers as lazy and will not tolerate menial jobs in the country mostly taken by migrant workers, stressing that there are many interrelated factors that lead to the problem.



Gopal noted that the real problem behind the unwillingness among Malaysians to take up elementary occupations is due to the low pay and the minimum wage structure, which does not allow them to afford a decent standard of living.

"We need to debunk the perception that Malaysians are unable to work in '3Ds' – dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs. In fact, the real problem is they are demotivated because of the low pay and the minimum wage structure, which does not allow them to afford a decent standard of living.

"At MTUC, we are not happy and disappointed with government for not considering RM1,200 as the new minimum wage rate. We feel that the latest scheme, at any situation, will not be a huge burden for employers as the salary increase was reasonable considering the high cost of living," he noted.

Commenting further on the matter, Gopal opined: "Firm policies [on the hiring of foreign worker] can navigate

and shape where Malaysia would be in the years ahead as what is set in place now will affect our future. Therefore, it is high time for the Government to draw up a new economic reality.

"In fact, all these should be seen as an effort to ensure that the salaries of locals are increased while dependencies on foreign workers are gradually decreased, together with capital repatriation and other social woes associated with it.

"Even though it is true to a certain extent that locals, especially those are more educated, cannot take being scolded for unnecessary things the way foreign workers experience on a daily basis, but we need to bring back the days when it was acceptable for Malaysians to be cashiers and waiters," Gopal asserted.

He added: "We should ask locals to fill these services jobs now being done by foreign workers. The time has come to make a fundamental change as to how economy works in Malaysia and we must do it now.

### **The Inspiring Story Of A Cleaner Who Is A Diploma Holder**

Speaking to *Malaysian Digest*, Ain Farhana (*pic*), 22, a technical assistant of RapidKL who used to work as a cleaner along with her mother, shared with us her story on taking the road less travelled despite graduating with a diploma in Geomatics in Science (Geographical Information System) from UiTM Seri Iskandar, Perak.

"I would earn about RM900 in a month being a cleaner. I used to get lots of negativity or comments by my friends because I was told that I shouldn't work here. It was then that I was offered a job in Damansara as a Technical Assistant for Acoustics. I was there for about a month and when I wanted to leave, the boss didn't allow me to.

"My boss told me my birth date matched the Feng Shui of the company and even offered to get me a car and any amount of salary I could ask for. Thing is, there was no mentor for me to learn about the job. And you will not be *ikhlas* (sincere) when you do your job if you're unhappy with the working conditions and demands. So I turned the job down and continued being a cleaner at RapidKL again.

"All the bosses were surprised that a university student was working as a cleaner - sweeping floors, washing toilets and picking up trash. But you see, if my mother can do this type of job to make ends meet, what makes you think you can't?" an optimistic Ain posed the question.

On whether our country should rely on foreign workers on elementary occupations in the country, she remarked: "I would say no because the hard fact is that the continuous reliance on foreign workers depresses local wages and reduces the incentives for businesses to become more innovative and productive.

"You see, when I work from the lower ladder, I could at least feel what my mother goes through every day of her working life to provide me with an education all the way to university. I have friends who are on the dean's list and are high-scoring students but all of them have yet to get a job. They constantly ask me how I got the job.

"To all Malaysians, especially the younger generation, my take is that it really falls back onto effort and the willingness to learn. You have to get out of your comfort zone and search. You have to adapt to new situations, environment and people," she added.

### **Government Needs To Stand Strong On Foreign Workers Policy**

Where do we want to see Malaysia in the next five or ten years?

Do we want an economic setup like in Middle East countries, where the foreign workers do most of the work or do we want to be like Sweden or Japan, where the locals do everything, from jobs involving physical labour to professional services despite the fact that most of them have tertiary education?

According to Nation Master – the internet's one stop centre for international statistics – Malaysia ranks No 12 in the world in the amount paid to foreign workers – USD 6.53 billion a year in which the Malaysian Employer's Federation (MEF) had highlighted earlier that the capital repatriated back to the foreign workers' country of origin is a loss of economic gain to the country.



Ain said the hard fact is that the continuous reliance on foreign workers depresses local wages and reduces the incentives for businesses to become more innovative and productive.



Imagine for every dollar in Malaysia's GDP/capita, 2.1% goes to foreign workers.

Surprisingly or not so, Malaysia ranks No 7 in the world behind Switzerland, Saudi, Kuwait, Oman, Lebanon and Luxembourg which we are in a different league. Now is this a reality we are willing to accept? Do we want to see a worsening of the current situation with Malaysians unable to find jobs in our own soil and the majority of them earning low incomes?

Going forward, the Government should not rest on its laurels but to put more money into Malaysian pockets. This will spark a virtuous economic cycle as buying power will increase, which will in turn increase business profits and tax collection. When the government collects more taxes, it can spend more on human capital and, in the end, the economy will grow further.

There is no denying that it might seem difficult to achieve but with the right planning, we can make this happen together – it is all about stern enforcement, excellent leadership and strong policies.

After all, the nation was built on the sweat and tears of our workers, and it is time we acknowledged their contributions. The government needs to engage actively with corporation to reconsider its policy on foreign workers policies and come up with the best solution.