

Bringing back fully vaccinated workers

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FOCUS

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Close

Protecting workers: Industrial workers waiting to be vaccinated at a Pikas (Public-Private Partnership Covid-19 Industry Immunisation Programme) vaccination centre at the Malaysia International Trade and Exhibition Centre early in July. — AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

BY today, almost all adults in the Klang Valley should have received at least one Covid-19 vaccine dose. The government's Operation Surge Capacity aimed to have everyone aged 18 and above in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur – two areas with soaring numbers of cases – jabbed with at least one dose by Aug 1. The mission, undertaken by the Covid-19 Immunisation Task Force, aimed to cover over 6.1 million Klang

As at Friday, 90.3% of the adult population in the Klang Valley had received at least one dose of their vaccination while 34.3% had received two doses. As this group largely consists of working people, employers are hoping for fully vaccinated workers to be allowed to physically return to the workplace and stop working from home. But at the same time, the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) urges all bosses to monitor compliance with Covid-19 SOPs to prevent outbreaks at work.

“MEF proposes to the government that employees that have been fully vaccinated should be allowed to work on site. This is especially for sectors where the nature of the work cannot be done remotely,” says its president Datuk Dr Syed Hussain Syed Husman, adding that the current vaccination rate averaging at over 500,000 jabs a day is encouraging.

However, it cannot be denied that the number of daily new infections remains high and workplace clusters still continue to top the list. On July 26, National Recovery Plan (NRP) coordinating minister Tengku Datuk Seri Zafrul Abdul Aziz said workplace clusters recorded the highest number of cases from June 1 to July 23.

While Syed Hussain acknowledges that daily case numbers in the thousands may not come down any time soon, he adds that “it is encouraging to see that a few states have been reclassified under Phase Two of the NRP and more non-essential economic sectors are being allowed to resume operations”.

Syed Hussain says such developments are critical as the Klang Valley is the hub of the Malaysian economy, contributing about 40% of the nation’s GDP.

“We recognise that workplace clusters still dominate most of the new Covid-19 clusters. However, it must be noted that due to the nature of Covid-19, it would be really difficult to pinpoint whether the infection is contracted at the workplace: “The employee may be infected elsewhere but is detected at the workplace and is thus classified as part of a workplace cluster,” he says.

As such, the MEF proposes that the government implements targeted lockdowns based on buildings or streets, “as opposed to putting the whole area or locality under lockdown, and this is to prevent further economic and mental stress for both employers and employees”, Syed Hussain says.

At the same time, he urges employers to strictly adhere to the SOPs.

“Employers must ensure that the workplaces are safe by sanitising the premises, implementing the necessary SOPs, and encouraging employees to be vaccinated by providing paid time off for screening and inoculation.

“Employers must work closely with the government and the community so that the nation wins the battle against Covid-19,” Syed Hussain stresses.

MEF also advises all employers to set up special teams – or those that already have health and safety committees – to monitor SOP compliance.

On the issue of maintaining physical distance at the workplace, Syed Hussain notes that during Phase One of the NRP, employers are allowed to operate at 60% capacity, thus allowing for physical distancing. “However, if the situation goes to 100% capacity and it is not possible for the company to maintain physical distancing due to space constraints, employers should voluntarily reduce the number of employees in the workplace until a workable solution on physical distancing is reached,” he says.

Echoing MEF’s sentiments, SME Association of Malaysia president Datuk Michael Kang says small and medium-sized enterprises want fully vaccinated workers to return to the workplace, adding that “most have already started recalling staff”.

What workers say

However, workers want all parties to look into the high number of workplace clusters to ensure everybody is safe.

“Working communities should be the government’s focus in handling the pandemic at this juncture. This is because workplace clusters are constantly outnumbering other types of outbreaks,” says Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor, president of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC).

Thanking the government for vaccinating the rakyat, Abdul Halim says the accelerated rate and efforts by all, including frontliners, should be applauded.

“MTUC would like to suggest that Members of Parliament and state assemblymen play their roles effectively too. They should form their own Covid-19 service centres to assist people in their constituencies. Their service will ease the Federal Government’s burden in tackling the pandemic at a national level,” he says.

Abdul Halim also calls on the government to ensure employers register for the Public-Private Partnership Covid-19 Industry Immunisation Programme (Pikas) to vaccinate all workers or face serious action, especially in connection with workers who are in the country illegally.

“MTUC has attempted many times to remind the government about illegal immigrants working in the country. Action should be taken seriously to find and vaccinate them,” he says.

Abdul Halim points out that employers who have hired illegal foreign workers are not going to surrender them voluntarily while such workers may fear facing the brunt of the law.

“The government should consider giving a time frame to employers to bring such workers for vaccinations.

“If the employers fail to do so after the time frame, then action should be taken against them,” he says.

Should fully vaccinated workers be allowed back into the work-place, Abdul Halim says health and safety procedures must be put in place. For example, “Companies should form and register Covid-19 rescue teams, in line with the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994,” he says.

Abdul Halim says the MTUC believes the pandemic can be controlled if all quarters are committed to the fight against the coronavirus.

“The health and safety of the people are the number one priority, they are Malaysia’s most valuable asset,” he says.