

# Malaysian government scapegoats foreign workers over social crisis

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The Malaysian government of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is engaging in a filthy campaign to demonise migrant workers as a means of deflecting public anger over the country's growing economic crisis. Police last month detained approximately 1,100 migrant workers suspected to be without visas in what was the largest such raid since May 2020.

On December 21, over 1,000 officers from a militarised section of the Malaysian police force normally used for counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations raided an area along Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin, located in central Kuala Lumpur.

Frequented by Bangladeshi businesses and workers, the area where the raid occurred has been derogatorily labelled “Mini Dhaka.” Like the vast majority of migrant workers in Malaysia, Bangladeshi workers are engaged almost exclusively in low- and semi-skilled work, often called the “3Ds”: dirty, dangerous, and difficult. Other areas of Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia have similar pejorative labels, such as “Mini Jakarta,” “Mini Yangon,” “Mini Kathmandu,” and “Mini Manila.”

The raid marks a particular low point in the government's agenda to blame migrant workers—one of the most vulnerable sections of the Malaysian working class—for declining economic conditions, which are entirely the making of Malaysia's ruling elite.

The raid was aimed at stirring up the most backward and reactionary elements within Malaysian society on the basis of racist slurs. The press sought to justify it by claiming local residents complained of feeling uneasy and uncomfortable around the Bangladeshis, who supposedly behaved “arrogantly.”

One of the filthiest aspects leading up to the police raid was a campaign by TikTok personality Sophian Mohd Zain. One video published on December 8 with

1.3 million views shows him chastising the Malaysian Immigration Department for releasing migrants after only 24 to 48 hours in custody.

Sophian claimed the migrants would go back to stealing the jobs of locals and consuming subsidised goods intended for locals. Sophian is well known for publishing videos doxxing, harassing, and verbally abusing migrants and which have featured him wandering around Jalan Tun Tan Siew Sin railing against Bangladeshi migrants.

No member of Prime Minister Anwar's so-called “progressive” Pakatan Harapan coalition government has stepped forward to oppose such racism. Instead, one day after the raids, Minister of Economy Rafizi Ramli stated on Twitter/X, “Dependence on foreign workers has reached 2.5 million people (documented, undocumented higher) which narrows the employment space for citizens. The effect is not only on job opportunities, but also the outflow of foreign currency when their salary is sent home every month.”

The government has also claimed that migrant workers are responsible for shortages of subsidised essential items such as cooking oil. Deputy Minister for Domestic Trade and Cost of Living Fuziah Salleh stated in early December that “with the implementation of targeted subsidies and Padu... identification will likely be required in the purchase of subsidised cooking oil in the future.” Padu refers to the government's central database hub for delivering public services.

Migrant workers constitute a significant and heavily exploited section of the Malaysian working class. Malaysia has a population of approximately 34.2 million and a work force of 16.7 million, which includes about 2.5 million migrants with visas. In addition, estimates of the number of migrants who have overstayed their visas vary but ranges between 1.5 to

3.5 million. Most migrant workers are from Indonesia, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Many migrant workers are lured to Malaysia by promises of jobs that never materialise, despite acquiring proper visas. Without work, they face losing their visas and are then branded as “undocumented.” Adrian Pereira, the executive director of North-South Initiative, a migrant rights group, stated, “There is a huge number of job scams that are happening where workers are trafficked to Malaysia without jobs but using formal working visas.”

The Malaysian government turns a blind eye to this trafficking of migrant workers who are often forced to labour for lower pay and longer working hours. Migrants typically work in manufacturing, construction, plantation work, agriculture, hospitality, and domestic work. Living conditions are substandard and inimical to one’s physical and mental well-being.

For example, in mid-2023, the United Nations labour agency and the International Labor Organization found that about 30 percent of domestic workers toil under exploitative conditions, including excessive work hours, unpaid overtime, low wages, high levels of isolation, and the curtailment of movement. Malaysia has approximately 300,000 to 400,000 such workers, mostly women with about 80 percent from Indonesia.

In the palm oil industry, employing about half a million workers, approximately 80 percent are migrants. Case studies by the International Organization of Migration demonstrate that this industry is based on “[f]orced labour practices such as debt bondage [to pay for highly inflated recruitment and travel costs], deceptive recruitment processes, retention of passports, and limited availability of or access to grievance mechanisms.”

While allowing these conditions to continue for the benefit of big business, the Anwar government is inflaming anti-migrant sentiments as a political safety release valve for mounting and intractable social and economic issues.

Government debt, currently RM1.5 trillion or \$US322 billion, is growing and the Malaysian ruling class is forcing the entire working class to foot the bill. The Anwar cabinet plans to cut government subsidies for essential items such as cooking oil, chicken, eggs, and fuel.

The government is also under pressure to reintroduce

the widely-hated goods and services tax (GST) in order to boost government revenue and pay down the debt. The current sales and service tax, which replaced the GST in late 2018, only covers 38 percent of goods and services. Under the previous GST, the coverage was 68 percent.

On January 9, Economy Minister Rafizi noted that the government was “open (about GST),” noting that the national debt had increased in 2022. The reintroduction of the GST would lead to a further cost-of-living increase for workers and the poor in particular.

Like its global counterparts, the Malaysian ruling class is shopping around for a scapegoat bag to deflect blame away from its growing attacks on all sections of the working class. This is the root cause of the attacks on foreign labourers. All workers and youth should reject this racist poison.



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