

Despite bleak market, still no takers for 'dirty' jobs vacated by foreigners

The social stigma surrounding dirty, dangerous and difficult jobs is still too much of a deterrent, even in the present economic situation.

Siva Selan Dec 25, 2020 11:00 AM



Employers find it hard to attract Malaysians to take up positions previously filled up by foreign workers.

Malaysians are unlikely to take up jobs in the 3D or dirty, dangerous and difficult category, even with tens of thousands out of a job this year as the social stigma surrounding such positions remains unchanged, experts say.

While cleaning, collecting waste and constructing and guarding buildings are necessary to social and economic functions, these jobs are also associated with a lower social caste.

For decades, foreigners have been the face of such sectors as locals steer clear, and according to economist Madeline Berma, it doesn't look like this will change any time soon.

“We are still reliant on foreign workers,” Madeline told MalaysiaNow.

In a nutshell, there are jobs that most Malaysians would prefer not to do, even those with limited or no academic qualifications whatsoever.

But lack of education is not really an issue in this case, Madeline says.

According to her, the local workforce has actually become more educated over the last decade with many finding positions in skilled and semi-skilled jobs.

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This leaves migrant workers to fill the gap left in the 3D category.

With the current economic downturn and changes in foreign worker policy, though, this source of labour is beginning to deteriorate as well.

Statistics from the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) show a decline in the number of foreign workers in the country from two million in 2019 to roughly 1.68 million this year. What has remained constant, however, is their job description: dirty, dangerous and difficult.

‘Locals don’t stick around’

With many illegal immigrants rounded up and detained at immigration depots, some industries like glove manufacturing and oil palm plantations are facing a major shortage in labour.

This means that more vacancies are available for low-skilled jobs.

But still, many of these positions remain empty, even as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on businesses and the economy.

Human Resources Minister M Saravanan recently said that nearly 100,000 workers had lost their jobs due to the conditional movement control order enforced in mid-October although roughly a third of job seekers also found work during the same period.

“Some locals did not even last a week before quitting.”

Earlier this year, foreign workers were banned from working at wet markets in Selangor. Traders were instead advised to hire locals to fill the vacancies.

But MEF executive director Shamsuddin Bardan said while locals are slowly accepting jobs that were once considered unacceptable, they do not stay there for long.

Giving the example of the Selayang wholesale market, he said some locals did not even last a week before quitting.

Such a high turnover rate makes it difficult for employers to continue running their business, he told MalaysiaNow.

This is despite the priority of employment which he said is always accorded to locals “especially now, since the hiring of foreign workers has been frozen for quite some time”.

Jobs in sectors like plantations and construction sites have never really attracted Malaysians, he added.

Shamsuddin said rebranding some jobs and giving them new names would help change this. For example, he said, security guards could be referred to as auxiliary police in order to create appeal and reduce social stigma.

“There is also a need to introduce new technology to make existing jobs more interesting,” he said.

For Madeline, it would also help to dangle a carrot.

“In the short term, the government needs to provide incentives and high wages for low-skilled Malaysians to take up these 3D jobs,” she said.

In the long run, though, these jobs might be taken over by automation and robots, she added.