

Malaysia: Absorb hospital cleaners to prevent exploitation, government told

Tuesday 30 June 2020, by [Malaysiakini](#) (Date first published: 11 June 2020).

An activist has taken the government to task, calling on it to get involved and use its political will to resolve issues regarding a cleaning company allegedly mistreating its employees.

National Union of Workers in Hospital Support and Allied Services (NUWHSAS) executive secretary M Sarasvathy said hospital cleaners should be absorbed as public servants rather than being managed by a third-party company under contractual terms.

“We want the health and human resources ministries to get involved, to use their political will and come out with a result,” Sarasvathy said, adding that, “The government should stop giving out (hospital cleaning service) contracts to ‘union-busters’.”

In a Facebook Live forum today, she hailed hospital cleaners as having the same heroic status as frontliners such as doctors and nurses who put themselves at risk during the Covid-19 outbreak.

“These workers are frontliners. The government should absorb them,” she said.

The forum, entitled “Workers’ Rights in a Pandemic - Hospital Cleaners’ Experience” was co-organised by the Freedom Film Network, Goethe-Institut Malaysia and supported by the European Union in Malaysia.

Sarasvathy, who is also the Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM) executive secretary, was among five individuals charged for purportedly violating the conditional movement control order (MCO) after they held a [protest](#) against UEM Edgenta Bhd outside the Ipoh general hospital early this month.

The protest was held over allegations of union-busting.

Sarasvathy, who fights for the rights of the hospital cleaners, noted that since 1997, workers at various government hospitals have been managed by up to 10 sub-contractors.

“From 1997 until now, almost 10 sub-contractors have changed. Every time there was a change, the workers were considered a fresh batch of workers and had their benefits cut or changed.

“One hospital cleaner has been working for 26 years but would be considered a new worker with each change of sub-contractor,” she said.

She added the cleaners were hoping for the elimination of the contract system so they could enjoy benefits according to their years of experience similar to public servants.

Also during the online forum, lawyer Edmund Bon urged the government to protect frontliners who earned a low wage.

“The government should protect them a little bit more. The workers’ seniority is lost after a change of employer. If your frontliners are in trouble, you should be the first to step in.

“It would reflect badly on the government if no action was taken,” said Bon, adding the workers were among those who supported the government.

He stressed that essential services such as hospital cleaning should not be outsourced or privatised.

“Another option is that if it’s privatised, there should be a tripartite agreement with the government also part of the contract.”

On June 5, the Workers Bureau of PSM had met with Human Resources Minister M Saravanan where problems concerning the hospital cleaners were among the matters discussed.

Following the Ipoh hospital protest, UEM Edgenta had issued a [statement](#) dismissing claims that the company has carried out union-busting activities.

It stated that a total of 2,200 cleaners from previous subcontractors had been employed directly under Edgenta UEMS instead of being subcontracted.

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