

“We Can't Just Sit Still”: Malaysian Cleaners Protest Amid Pandemic

Friday 2 July 2021, by [CHUA Minxi](#) (Date first published: 6 July 2020).

Hospital cleaners in Malaysia have faced decades of low pay, hostile working environments and apathy from their employers. Now on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19, they are taking to the streets to battle years of injustice.

Good morning Dear Minxi. Final date is 2/6/2020. No changes. Picket at Ipoh hospital on the 2/6/2020 (Tuesday) @ 11.30 am.

The text message arrived on 29 May from unionist Sarasvathy “Saras” Muthu. As one of the founding members of a socialist [political party](#), Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM), Saras has been an ardent and vocal defender of working-class Malaysians for decades, long before she became executive secretary of the National Union of Workers in Hospital Support and Allied Services in Peninsular Malaysia (NUWHSAS).

I first met Saras in early 2019, when I started working on [Bila Kami Bersatu](#) (*When We Are One*), a documentary about the NUWHSAS that I produced and co-directed. The film premiered in September 2019, but Saras and I stayed in touch afterwards. She had initially informed me about the union's plan to stage a picket over the phone, a few days before sending the decisive text message. It would be a small demonstration, she assured me, consisting only of the union's executive committee. I asked about safety. “Don't worry, there are not too many of us going,” she responded. “We'll make sure to socially distance.”

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But COVID-19 was not what scared me, though Saras is in her mid-sixties and recently suffered from a bout of bad health. Instead, I feared that she would face a hostile police presence while on the picket line. The police are a spectre that haunts almost all Malaysian protests, and one that has only seemed to grow beneath the virus' shroud—with multiple reports of police conducting [mass arrests of migrant workers and refugees](#), and detaining people suspected of violating the nation's Movement Control Order (MCO) under [worrying circumstances](#). Some of those arrested have been from [underprivileged](#) and low-income communities.

I was right to be afraid.

Saras was arrested on the afternoon of 2 June, along with two other union leaders and two PSM activists. They were charged under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act of 1988, and Sections 186 and 269 of the [Malaysian Criminal Procedure Code](#), for “obstructing [a] public servant in discharge of his public functions” and a “negligent act likely to spread infection of any disease dangerous to life”, respectively. Photos of the protest show the union members standing at least a metre apart, all wearing masks. Those same photos show police officers crowding around the

protestors, and corralling them into black police vans. Some of the police officers seen in the photos are not wearing masks.

Inside the van, the protestors were handcuffed and chained together. They spent one night in lock-up, where they say they were repeatedly harassed and called “gambang” (bastard/child born out of wedlock), “binatang” (animal) and “bodoh” (stupid) by police officers. According to Saras, one officer forced a PSM activist in her sixties named Jody to remove her *thali*—a marriage thread worn by Hindu practitioners. The protestors were also allegedly pressured to undress in front of officers, threatened with a baton and denied water and face masks while jailed, Saras says. According to a PSM statement, despite police attempts to obtain a remand order of four days, all five protestors were released on bail on 3 June, a day after their arrest.

Saras and her fellow union members now face a battle in court, as they have pleaded not guilty to the charges against them and have also lodged a [report against the police](#), alleging wrongful arrest and mistreatment in jail. Yet, Saras has no regrets. Though she knew the dangers she would face going out onto the streets, there was no doubt in her mind that the protest had to take place, now, no matter what.

In Saras’ words: “Some people are saying it’s not a good time to do this. But what else can we do? Cleaners are being bullied so badly by the management. Every day, they’re getting harassed. We can’t just sit still and do nothing.”

The Beginning of the End: Privatisation and Broken Promises

Cleaners working in government hospitals in Malaysia have faced hardship and systemic injustice for as long as Saras has been fighting for workers’ rights—which is to say, for decades.

It began in the 1990s, when many Malaysian state-owned industries, including hospital cleaning services, were privatised. This meant that cleaners working in government hospitals would no longer be employed directly by the government, but by private companies instead. These private companies are usually subcontractors, employed in turn by massive government-linked companies, which include UEM Edgenta Mediserve (the firm that holds the primary contract for hospital cleaning services in the north of Peninsular Malaysia), Khazanah Nasional (which in turn owns Edgenta’s parent company, UEM Berhad) and the 1Malaysia Development Berhad fund, better known as 1MDB, which was infamously misused by Prime Minister Najib Razak.

Unlike doctors and nurses, hospital cleaners work on fixed-term contracts, usually lasting between one and three years. As privately employed staff, they are often denied the basic rights and benefits enjoyed by public healthcare employees working in the same hospitals. They are not guaranteed pay raises, contract renewals, days off for public holidays or even paid medical leave. A cleaner who has worked at a hospital for more than 20 years is paid the same salary as one who started working in 2020: RM1,200 (US\$280) a month, the minimum wage in Malaysia.

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After pension and social security deductions, cleaners’ average take-home pay is usually closer to RM1,000 (US\$233)—in a country where the estimated living wage is nearly three times that, or RM2,700 (US\$633) a month for a single person. Many cleaners, however, must also support families on their meagre salary. Over the course of filming *Bila Kami Bersatu*, my co-director and I met many single mothers, widows or divorcees working as cleaners to provide for their children. Some are elderly, with only a secondary school education. Others work two to three other jobs in order to

make ends meet.

The NUWHSAS exists to combat and change these dire circumstances. Revived in 2018 after a long period of dormancy, the union swiftly set out to advocate for the rights of its members. *Bila Kami Bersatu* followed the union negotiating its first collective bargaining agreement where cleaners were, for the first time, able to sit face-to-face with their employers in an official meeting setting and directly demand better working conditions.

What resulted from these conversations was a hopeful step forward. A collective agreement was eventually reached between the union and the subcontractor company managing hospitals in the north of Peninsular Malaysia, NS Medik, on 23 October 2019. Under the Industrial Relations Law, the agreement is legally-binding and ensures cleaners' rights to public holidays, paid medical leave and overtime pay. It also bars employers from forcing cleaners to reapply for their existing positions during the contract renewal period. Furthermore, a clause in the agreement states that changes in management will not affect the legitimacy of the document for at least three years from the signing of the document, which was backdated to the start of 2019.

The favourable terms of this first agreement were a long-awaited victory for the union. Members had tentative plans, in the next round of negotiations, to argue for a 36% raise in base salary—to RM1,500 (US\$350)—as well as further incremental pay rises. For a brief moment, it seemed that open and honest discussion would be enough to secure the rights of hospital cleaners in Malaysia.

But these hopes were soon dashed.

In January 2020, NS Medik was replaced by UEMS Edgenta, a subcontractor owned by Edgenta UEM. Before its tenure even began, UEMS openly flouted the collective agreement signed by its predecessor. In December 2019, UEMS staff visited hospitals in Penang and Perak to distribute application forms to cleaners and told them they would need to reinterview for their existing jobs. [Those who refused to sign the forms were threatened](#) by UEMS representatives. Some say they were fired without warning on the first day of the new year.

From the moment UEMS took the reins, hospital cleaners active in the union say they have faced a level of bullying and harassment from UEMS supervisors and corporate management that would be considered abusive under normal circumstances. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become a full-blown health and human rights crisis.

Front-line Workers: Fighting the Virus and Employer Abuse

COVID-19 had a slow start in Malaysia.

Until 20 February, there were fewer than 40 reported cases in the country. Then, on 23 February, a meeting between politicians descended into a "[backdoor coup](#)", two weeks of political pandemonium and the dissolution of the ruling Pakatan Harapan government. On 27 February, 15,000 people from the Islamic missionary movement Tablighi Jama'at gathered at the Sri Petaling Mosque in Kuala Lumpur. An attendee was later found to be COVID-19 positive. By 17 March, the country had 673 active COVID-19 cases.

At this point, the new Perikatan Nasional government had been in power for a little over two weeks. The next day, they began enforcing the MCO, a lockdown that severely restricted the movement of most Malaysians, excluding essential workers. Originally set to end on 31 March, the MCO has since been extended four times, with the country now being in the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) phase, until 31 August.

As such, there should be no better time to champion for the rights of cleaners, along with all other essential workers.

Yet while UEMS is happy to call its employees “heroes” in an [Instagram post](#), the company’s treatment of cleaners presents a contradictory picture. On 23 March, UEMS faced [media](#) scrutiny when it was revealed that cleaners at Hospital Teluk Intan were denied COVID-19 screenings, despite 37 medical staff at the hospital testing positive for the virus. The news coverage followed social media posts from union members, who highlighted the case on Facebook and Twitter.

From her Ipoh home, Saras has remained in constant contact with cleaners and union leaders in other hospitals who have reported a worryingly high number of incidents which have put cleaners at risk. [UEMS has released multiple statements](#) that refute these reports and called the union’s accusations of abuse “false” and “[misleading allegations](#)”. Specifically regarding the issue of “verbal harassment and intimidation” towards members of “union worksite committee[s]”, the company says it has “not received any specific report on incidents pertaining to this matter”, and that it will form an “internal task force” to review allegations. It also claims to have cooperated with the union, while acknowledging that the union has filed a case against it in Industrial Relations court.

However, hospital cleaners themselves have a far different story to tell. Since the start of the MCO, *New Naratif* has received nearly 20 complaints of neglect and abuse levelled against management by dozens of hospital cleaners from across the country. Most of these cleaners have asked to remain anonymous due to fears of reprisal from their supervisors. It has never been easy to report on the reality facing cleaners from inside government hospitals, as there are strict protocols that prevent filming and recording on hospital premises. In the wake of COVID-19, it has become more difficult than ever. Still, cleaners continue to send new reports of abuse, via text messages, voice recordings and phone calls. Their stories highlight a range of recurring issues, but all seem to indicate an increasingly untenable situation.

One issue is a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE). Cleaners at Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun (known colloquially as Hospital Ipoh), Hospital Bukit Mertajam and Hospital Kuala Kangsar reported being forced to reuse gloves, aprons and face masks in the early stages of the MCO. Some say that they were not given any PPE at all, or had their equipment moved out of personal lockers by UEMS supervisors to out-of-reach storerooms, with no clear reason given. UEMS has denied all allegations of insufficient PPE supplies, stating that they had taken “extra efforts to procure PPE to ensure the safety of staff” despite global PPE shortages.

A cleaner at Hospital Teluk Intan sent in a complaint saying that they had been denied a UEMS COVID-19 “allowance”—a RM300 (US\$70) one-time payment—despite being the sole cleaner assigned to a COVID-19 ward.

Unsurprisingly, there are also cases of suspected illness. At Hospital Tuanku Ampuan Najihah (known as Hospital Kuala Pilah), a cleaner with a sore throat and fever claims they were sent home on sick leave without being tested for COVID-19. At Hospital Ipoh, a cleaner with only three months experience says she was asked to clean a ward where COVID-19 patients were being treated—a fact that was not communicated to her by the attending nurse. When she fell ill with flu-like symptoms, she was given 14 days of paid medical leave and returned to work immediately after.

There are multiple reports of wages being paid late or overtime not being paid at all. Cleaners at four different hospitals—Kuala Pilah, Jempol, Tampin and Jelebu—reached out to the union in mid-April saying that their March salaries had been delayed by weeks. All four hospitals are managed by the same subcontractor, Impressia Sdn Bhd, which is based in the south of Peninsular Malaysia. Impressia’s managing director Darus Bin Latif did not respond to questions sent by *New Naratif*.

In response to the protest, Health Director-General Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah called the tensions between the union and UEMS an “[internal issue](#)”, promising to step in only if cleaning services are disrupted. In turn, UEMS has promised to ensure [no service disruption](#) at its hospitals and manage issues relating to workers’ welfare internally.

However, [the ministry has made no statements on its exclusion of cleaners from a RM600 \(US\\$140\) monthly allowance](#), which the government promised to all healthcare workers fighting on the front lines of COVID-19. Also excluded are emergency staff, pharmacists and medical officers on fixed-term contracts. Left to fill the gaps are private employers, who do so inadequately and imprecisely. A cleaner at Hospital Teluk Intan sent in a complaint saying that they had been denied a UEMS COVID-19 “allowance”—a RM300 (US\$70) one-time payment—despite being the sole cleaner assigned to a COVID-19 ward.

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There are also reports from cleaners who say they have been harassed and bullied by their supervisors. Zaitun*, a cleaner at Hospital Ipoh, spoke of the verbal and mental abuse she and her colleagues endure on a daily basis: “They scream at us: get out! Hey, you, get out! They speak to us without any respect. One time, they even shocked the staff nurses with their screaming. The nurses all ran towards us, thinking that there was a fight going on. But that’s just how they talk to us. Hey, you, get out!”

However, perhaps the worst forms of alleged abuse are directed towards cleaners who are active in the union. “I can’t go anywhere,” Zaitun tells *New Naratif*. “The supervisors follow me around; they take photos of me. They change my [work] location around all the time. I’m not allowed to mix with other people. But the worst thing was what happened after Hari Raya. My locker was broken into over the holiday. They opened it up and took all my equipment out, gloves, masks, plastic bags. I think they were looking for forms, because they know I’m a member of the union. But they didn’t find anything.”

Zaitun, who serves as an advocate for her fellow cleaners at Hospital Ipoh, is now on medical leave. She was diagnosed with “work-related stress” after seeking counselling in response to repeated harassment from UEMS supervisors. Her absence only makes it more difficult for the union to investigate and challenge other incidents of abuse happening at Hospital Ipoh, which in turn contributes to a continued climate of silence and fear.

There was a point in time, during the collective bargaining negotiations of 2018 and 2019, when cleaners and supervisors could sit and speak at the same table—when the union and management were, to an extent, even in agreement. However, this time has long passed. The union has made multiple attempts to inform UEMS of their concerns, having sent the company eight letters, the first on 20 March, and the most recent on 28 May, detailing the complaints listed above. However, UEMS has chosen not to respond directly to the union, though they do acknowledge one letter, sent on 31 March, in their [3 June statement](#). Meanwhile, cleaners must still go to work and battle the pandemic without the proper tools or protocols to protect them. To quote Saras once more: “Now is the time for us to fight. The management should respond, but they have spent every moment of the MCO union-busting. That’s why we had to picket. Because the situation had become extreme.”

Taking to the Streets in the Time of COVID-19

This is not the first time Saras has been arrested for protesting. In 2011, she and five other PSM

members were arrested under the Emergency Ordinance Law, during a government crackdown on the BERSIH movement, which was planning its second electoral reform rally at the time. BERSIH, or the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, is a collective of nongovernmental organisations that has fought for free and fair elections in Malaysia since 2005, and that was instrumental in ending the 61-year reign of Barisan Nasional in 2018, then led by Prime Minister Najib Razak. The Bersih 2.0 rally, held on 9 July 2011, drew between 10,000 and 20,000 Malaysians to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, making it one of the largest and most impactful protests in the nation's history.

Around [60 activists](#) were detained in the lead-up to the rally, including Saras. She was kept in solitary confinement for over a month, forced to sign a 62-page statement while too unwell to read or understand what it said [and also made to take a lie detector test](#). The test was so stressful that she was eventually sent to a government hospital in Kuala Lumpur after suffering from chest pains where she was handcuffed to her bed and observed day and night by two police officers, she tells *New Naratif*.

These experiences, horrific as they were, did not deter her from continuing her work in political and labour organising. Nor has it stopped her from protesting against corrupt and exploitative systems in Malaysia, the 2 June picket being the most recent example of this.

Their arrest, the latest in a long list of abuses inflicted upon hospital cleaners, also bodes ill for the future of peaceful civil disobedience in Malaysia. If the government and its affiliated entities are willing to weaponise the pandemic against the very people protecting us from it, then what hope is there for other communities fighting for freedom from oppression?

Perhaps one answer lies online.

Already, there have been two digital protests against another egregious example of state-sanctioned abuse, namely the mass arrests of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers that took place on 1 May and 20 May. Both protests, headed under the tagline [#MigranJugaManusia](#) ([#MigrantsAreAlsoHuman](#)), received massive outpourings of support across social media platforms in Malaysia. Following Saras' arrest, hundreds of negative comments were posted on the UEMS Instagram post mentioned above, with criticisms such as: *Old aunties and uncles are detained and hand cuffed just bcs they are asking for their rights and protesting peacefully. Really? How did u guys sleep at night?*

Saras and I recently spoke again on the phone, soon after the union filed a report to the Malaysian police force's Department of Integrity and Compliance Standards (Jabatan Integriti dan Pematuhan Standard in the original Malay, or JIPS) on 21 June. Saras says she is confident that JIPS will hold the police accountable for their abusive behavior towards the protestors. Indeed, the Ipoh deputy police chief promised in a [a 22 June statement](#) to launch an "an internal investigation" based on the union's allegations, and to "take action" if the allegations are proven to be true. As for the other parties involved—namely UEMS, its parent companies and the Malaysian government—Saras doubts that responsibility will be taken.

"The police told us that the health minister [Adham Baba] was coming," Saras says, recounting the moments leading up to the arrest. "They told us to go and wait inside the hospital. We did, but the minister didn't turn up. So the police told us they would call the [UEMS] management. While we were still waiting, they arrested us. But why did the police come into the picture in the first place? We followed all the [standard operating procedures] for the picket. This was an industrial action. In the Industrial Relations Act, Section 40 clearly says that if the management doesn't respond to you, then workers have the right to picket. It's our right. The law says we can picket."

She continues with more questions: “So why did the police show up? Who is behind it? Are UEMS and the government using their power and authority, to scare unionists? All the while they’ve been doing union-busting among the workers in hospitals. So on the second [of June], did they use their power to try to teach us a lesson? To kill the union? These are my questions. Otherwise, why did the police need to come?”

In a statement released on 6 June, UEM Edgenta said: “[T]he Company neither contacted the authorities during the unfortunate incident, nor is the Company pressing any charges on them”. The firm also reiterated that “it has always remained professional in dealings with the National Union of Workers in Hospital Support and Allied Services”.

Call to Action

- Keep up to date on this issue by directly following NUWHSAS on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). You can also donate directly to the union at the bank account listed on this [website](#). The union will need roughly RM50,000 in legal fees to fight the charges that the police have levied against them in court.
- If you are interested in learning more about NUWHSAS and unions in Malaysia in general, please let New Naratif know on our social media or via email. We are planning a series of teach-ins related to this story in the coming weeks, and would love to hear what topics our community would like us to cover.

**A pseudonym has been used to protect the worker’s identity due to fear of reprisals from management.*

Chua Minxi is a Malaysian writer, editor, translator and researcher. She has studied and worked in Beijing, New York, Singapore, and Manchester; and, for much of this time, has been writing a novel on mental illness, the postcolonial Malaysian psyche, intergenerational female trauma, and chickens. She is New Naratif’s Operations Coordinator. Reach her at minxi.chua@newnaratif.com.

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