

Malaysia: Puan Nur Zahirah: life as an oppressed worker

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To have a job in a time of crisis may seem like a blessing, but could the same be said if your employer, for whatever reason, does not pay your salary on time? You may feel morally obligated to accept their excuses in good faith and treat it as a one-off occurrence — seeing that we are in the middle of a crisis — as you anxiously wait for the next payday.

Once might be tolerable, but repeatedly, four weeks later? And, what's more, with an additional accumulated salary of two months unsettled? How many more months would you go on living like this, as you continue to work without being compensated for your labour, enduring this state of uncertainty and unfairness in fear of facing the reality of having zero income once you decide to remove yourself from the situation.

This is not a rhetorical question for Puan Nur Zahirah Zakaria, a fifty-five-year-old cleaner at a primary school in Sekinchan, Selangor. It is an ordeal that she has been forced to face every day since the end of November last year when her employer abruptly stopped paying her salary.

As the breadwinner in a household of four, she is heavily reliant on being paid for her work at the end of each month in order to support her family. She earns the minimum wage for non-urban areas — RM 1,100 — of which she gets a much less spending total of RM 973 after deducting her contributions to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Social Security Organisation (SOCSO). Remarkably, she has always managed to save modestly even from that paltry amount with an experience from a lifetime of thrift built into her.

Her husband is in his sixties and thus only able to “kerja sawah sikit-sikit” in the morning, earning a measly RM 25 a day. They raised four children together — two are currently married with their own households to run and the other two live with them. One is a thirty-one-year-old who is struggling to find permanent work, and the other is a nineteen-year-old who is hoping to continue her studies after STPM.

Which raises the question: how long was this hardworking breadwinner able to tolerate working for her employer without being paid a single cent? Four months.

Puan Nur Zahirah endured more than 100 days of hardship, during which she spent RM 11,000, dipping into her own savings as the expenses inevitably piled up due to many things breaking down and requiring maintenance — such as the roof of her house and her car's air-conditioner. The biggest expenditure was to replace faulty electrical wiring and the resulting spoilt equipment. “Api pecah... dua, tiga, empat wiring baru. Kipas, dua kena pasang. Semuanya RM 4,300.” she added.

The roof of her house is still leaking due to the recent storms that caused a couple of pieces of zinc to tear off. Unfortunately, repairing it will have to wait, as she estimates the cost of repair to be as high as RM 3,000. “Nak beli zink sekarang, mahal. Tak tahu cukup pun, RM 3,000.” She had already tried applying for funds from the eKasih poverty programme but was unsuccessful.

“Dua puluh orang minta, semua tak dapat. Hanya satu sahaja yang dapat... rumahnya terbakar.” she said, as she referenced her current state of dilemma.

While all this was going on, Jaringan Pekerja Kontrak Kerajaan (JPKK), a network of government contract workers, were raising these particular issues to the authorities, namely the District Education Office (or its Malay acronym, PPD) of the Ministry of Education. This was because there were countless other cleaners in the same position — other problematic companies, with other anomalies not contributing to their worker’s EPF. The prevalence of these problems points to poor accountability among the authorities and the need to fix the system.

To be heard and taken seriously, the workers needed to take collective action. And so they did.

The first proposed action was to not turn up for work until the issues are resolved. Puan Nur Zahirah, however, was in a bind. She took pride in being responsible for her work and felt bad that the teachers would have to do the cleaning in her place if she did not show up. “Saya kasihan cikgu, tak mahu cikgu basuh tandas saya. Saya kata, cikgu jangan buat kerja saya,” she said.

On top of that, an officer from the PPD (Pejabat Pelajaran Daerah) came to her school to monitor the situation one day, threatening — “Siapa mogok, datang, punch card, tak buat kerja, saya akan potong gajinya,” Puan Nur Zahirah relayed.

A proposed sit-in protest outside the Prime Minister’s Department, however, was agreeable to her.

But it would take a whole working day, as it is a four-hour to-and-fro journey by bus. With an annual leave of only six days, she could not afford to apply for leave so early in the year; ergo, she paid a friend RM 40 to work in her place so that she could go to Putrajaya. “Sebenarnya RM 38,” she said, clarifying her daily rate. “Tapi saya bagi dua ringgit lebih.” To round it up.

So, on March 29, 2022, Puan Nur Zahirah joined fifty-two other cleaners in Sabak Bernam District to camp outside the Prime Minister’s Department — packing up food, mats, clothing, and whatever else they needed for the event. That morning, right after boarding the bus, she received a last-minute text message from her employer, imploring them to cancel the protest. But arrangements were already made and in place.

The sit-in made the authorities sit up. The officer they met promised that their salaries would be fully paid by the 1st of April. Despite this, Puan Nur Zahirah is still owed a month’s salary today.

She remembered her starting pay was around RM 900. It has been an increase of just a couple of hundred ringgit over a decade, averaging at RM 20 a year, and that too, is thanks to a large part of effort carried by labour activists fighting to raise the minimum wage over the years.

However, there are other problems remaining. Puan Nur Zahirah’s employer has not been consistently contributing to her EPF. The number of annual leave days she is entitled to is another point of contention — which was why she chose to write on her protest sign, “Mana cuti tahun kami?”. Under the labour law, those who have worked for one to two years are entitled to a minimum of eight days’ annual leave. She has worked for three companies over 10 years or so and had eight days previously, but only six under her current employer.

That will be another battle for another day. Nevertheless, it will not be a lonesome one, while the network of cleaners continues to grow under JPKK as they stand up for their rights as workers.

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