

Situation of workers in some South East Asian countries in the times of coronavirus pandemic

Friday 1 May 2020, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2020).

Philippines

The Philippines is emerging as one of South East Asia's worst COVID-19 hot spots. On April 21, the *[official]* death toll was 437, having risen by more than a hundred deaths in a week. The Duterte regimes response has been a draconian militarised lockdown — that has led to almost 30,000 arrests in its first month — without any accompanying public health measures such as mass testing. The immediate effect of the lockdown imposed on Metro Manila on March 15, and the whole of Luzon on March 17, was to deprive millions of workers of any income.

While the government announced a ₱5000 (US\$98) one-off payment for workers (under the Labor Department's [DOLE] COVID-19 Adjustment Measure Program [CAMP] for regular private workers), this is dependent on employers submitting paperwork (and many haven't) and does not cover contract and informal sector workers. Workers from at least 250 companies in Metro Manila have reported "unjust treatment," which includes "no work, no pay" arrangements, illegal termination, reduced pay owing to "flexible work arrangement," and non-application of CAMP. The workers' plight is exacerbated by the total shutdown of public transportation, as there are still a number of operating establishments, primarily hospitals, supermarkets, and factories who require workers to report to work. Some of these workers have to walk several miles to go to work.

Frontline health workers are especially at risk, with all hospitals are operating beyond their maximum capacity, and necessary drugs and protective equipment have been running out of stock. Aside from a rapidly increasing infection rate, COVID-19 has infected more than 800 Filipino health workers, killing 22 as of this writing.

Duterte also promised a "Social Amelioration Program" (SAP) as cash relief for the "poorest of the poor" worth P200 billion; however, hardly any family has received the P5,000 to P8,000 (US\$ 98-158) dole per household. Under these conditions, facing the prospect of hunger, staying at home is not an option for a majority of people, who are forced to try and find ways to earn a living. On April 4, police arrested 19 vendors in Quezon City for setting up their stalls providing income for themselves and food for others. They were all released on April 7 because of community solidarity. But the arrests of street vendors continues.

An important part of left response and resistance has been distribution of food and medical supplies to poor communities. The food drive is combined with a campaign for mass testing for the virus.

While testing kits are in short supply, priority has been given to the clique around Duterte and other members of the elite, so that while tests are not available for those at most risk, the well-connected are able to get tested even if they don't meet the government's own criteria for who needs tests. This disastrous state of affairs has generated resistance. On April 1, residents of the urban poor

community Sitio San Roque, spilled onto the neighbouring EDSA — a major Manila thoroughfare — with placards demanding promised emergency food distribution. They were violently dispersed by the police and military, and 21 residents arrested. Duterte responded characteristically by threatening to shoot protesters and “leftists” who he blamed for the protest. However, their protest had results and food distribution took place the next day. Moreover, an outpouring of solidarity, and people stepping forward to post bail for the arrested residents, meant that all were released on April 6. The regime has been using the lockdown as a cover for repressive actions against anti-mining activists as well. On April 6, more than 100 heavily armed police dispersed a blockade by indigenous community leaders of the Didipio gold mine in Kasibu, Nueva Vizcaya. The blockade was set up in July 2019 after the contract allowing the Australian-owned multinational corporation, Oceana Gold, to operate the mine expired.

Malaysia

COVID-19 in Malaysia was first discovered on 25th January. When the first wave of cases almost subdued in the end of February, the second wave of the spread of COVID-19 occurred when localised clusters began to emerge in March. As of 29th April, there are already 5,945 [official] cases of COVID-19 in Malaysia with 100 deaths.

On 16th March, the government already announced a 2 week Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18th until 31st March, that restricted all movements except for a limited numbers that needed for essential services such as medical, security, food and groceries and for a representative from a family to go out to purchase necessities. The MCO was later being extended to the second phase from 1st April until 14th April and later was again being extended until 28th April, and for 4th time the MCO extended until 12th May 2020.

The MCO brought to a lot of issues especially for the working class. At initial stage of the MCO, government said only essential industries are allowed to operate. But, in the third and fourth phase of the MCO, more factories had been allowed to resume operation, with a set of rules that among all focus on social distancing, only a maximum of 50% of employees are allowed to work, the premises must be frequently sanitizes, all employees at work must wear a face mask and few other rules for the health purposes. Many industries do not follow the safety guidelines set by the government. Moreover, more industries which are not essentials also started to operate with the government approval. Despite this, those who are not operating, start to retrench workers. Based on the Labor Department’s statistic, there were 7,159 employees retrenched just in two months, from March to April 2020. This brings a huge worries of rampant unemployment by end of the MCO and economic recession. Many workers are forced to receive pay cut and unpaid leave.

The situation for workers in informal sector is worse, including migrant and refugee workers. Malaysia is one of the countries with high numbers of migrant workers in Southeast Asia. There are about 6 millions migrant workers and among them 4 million are undocumented, and another 200,000 refugees. They are mostly working in informal sectors and survived on a daily wage. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, most of them are losing their jobs and many are facing evictions from the landlords due to not able to rental. Majority of migrants and refugees now heavily depending on food aid provided by some NGOs in the country.

For the people, the government had provided the one-off financial support through cash aid called Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) for about RM1,000 to RM1,600 according to their household monthly income. On top of that, the banks also implement moratorium of payment for loans for 6 months until October 2020. And people with savings in the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) was allowed to withdraw their saving up to RM500 per month for a year until March 2021. Recently, government has stopped the NGOs to distribute food aids and this task been taken over by

government welfare department.

For the small and medium industries (SMEs), the government allocated RM 10 billion to support their businesses in the form of wage subsidy. The SMEs cover 40% of workforce in the country. Aside this, there are RM3,000 special grant is given for 700 000 micro-level SMEs and government also appealed to the small business landlord to reduce the rental for 30%.

Thailand

The outbreak of COVID-19 started in January by Chinese tourists and then Thai people who traveled back from China and Japan. After that, there were super spreaders, i.e. Lumpini boxing stadium in charged by Thai Army, a COVID-19 cluster infection, which organized the 6th March boxing championship matches. More than 50 people have been confirmed to have COVID-19 in that cluster.

Consequently, the government announced the state of emergency from 26th March until 30th April, followed by partial lockdown measures of various provinces that led to the closure of businesses, entertainment, events, reduced public activities, traveling so that people stay home or work from home. For example, the partial lockdown of Bangkok city, beginning on 22nd March and imposing closure for 26 types of workplaces, has led to 80,000 thousands Thai migrant workers travel back to their hometown in various provinces and migrant workers, such as about 7,000 Myanmar workers,' travel back to their country. Besides, the government announced the nationwide night-time curfew which began on 3rd April.

The above measures have dramatically caused the reduction of workers' income in general, especially in the private sector, such as self-employed, freelancers, independent contractors, factory workers, urban poor, migrant workers. There are also many lay-offs. There were an additional 140,000 unemployed in March. And now cumulative total 700,000 people who are unable to find jobs. Different labour organizations have launched statements to call on the government to improve relief measures for all workers.

On 30th April, the government's Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration reported that there were 7 new COVID-19 patients, raising the total to 2,954 in 68 provinces, no more death, and 2,687 recovered. The accumulated death toll now stands at 54.

The tally of new cases is lower. Because of limited testing, however, the actual number of infections is believed to be higher.

Even if the rate of infections is continuing to fall, people must continue to take precautions for their own protection. And there are about 62,000 people under watch as potential high-risk to the virus infections. Bangkok still has the highest number of Covid-19 patients at 1,497. And the government has just decided on 28 April to extend the state of emergency for another month to 31 May 2020 and maintain the curfew, but ease the lockdown of businesses.

Relief measures for workers to ease the impact of the pandemic

The government has launched financial aid programs to relief grievance of informal and formal workers hit by the pandemic. However, the programs cannot truly help the workers in need.

The cash relief measure of 5,000 baht/month for 3 months (from April to June 2020) for informal workers who are not members of the Social Security System (SSS) such as motorcycle drivers, taxi drivers, small vendors, and so on. Only nine million people out of 21.7 million who registered are eligible for the 5,000-baht financial aid because the government has set rules and conditions causing

many problems. The government has used a registration website and artificial intelligence to screen applicants. The matrix is considered unfair and delayed distribution of the cash. Dozens of informal workers, whose applications for 5,000 baht were turned down, were angry and protested the Ministry of Finance. Besides, tens of workers committed suicide as they have suffered from starving.

Besides, the matrix limits some occupation groups such as self-employed farmers because the government will launch another one measure to support which the payment of 15,000 baht/family for millions households. It may not be sufficient for them. One more group which excluded is construction workers who are still working. As for migrant workers, they are excluded from the cash relief measure despite the fact that many migrant workers stop working. They do not have sustained income to survive.

The Social Security System compensation covers members (about 11 million formal workers) in the event of loss of employment or suspension from work due to the outbreak. Currently, workers in different enterprises are facing job termination without receiving compensation from the employers under the Labor Protection Act. The job termination does not result from force majeure or the pandemic; therefore, the employers must follow the labour law.

In another case, workers are told by their employers to stop working without pay. Therefore, they have to use the government's aid program from the SSS. They are eligible to obtain benefits for unemployment compensation due to force majeure from the pandemic in accordance with the new Ministerial Regulation announced in Mid-April. The measure includes the case that the employers temporarily stopped their business and were ordered by the government to suspend operations for the sake of virus containment. The compensation rate amounts to 62% of the daily wage and the maximum compensation period is capped at 90 days, which labour network considers it unfair because the employers put the burden onto the employees.

The minimum wage or basic salary of the workforce is actually about 10,000 baht per month. It is not sufficient to live on. They thus work overtime or find extra income in order to have an additional income of about 5,000-10,000 baht. That's why the compensation of 62% of the daily wage is not enough. Reducing utility costs and suspending debt measures are too small relief.

Most recently, the government issued an Emergency Decree authorizing the Ministry of Finance to lend 1 trillion baht. It also ordered ministries to return 10% of the budget to heal and recover economy caused by the outbreak of Covid-19. Labor network proposed some demands to the government to improve the remedy measures to be fair for all workers, i.e. unemployed formal workers affected by the pandemic should get 100% of the salary and employer must pay as well as the government, not 62% as mentioned above. Migrant workers must be granted financial aid similar to informal workers. All informal workers must be granted without AI's process.

Social Security Office lately revealed that up to four million formal workers affected by the Covid-19 pandemic were expected to apply for unemployment benefits. And 1.2 million formal workers had registered for unemployment benefits as of 21 April, and 500,000 had been examined and verified. And according to Bangkok Post's report, the spokeswoman says the office anticipates the number of applicants to soar to between 3 million-4 million if the Covid-19 situation worsens.

Workers should not sacrifice their lives to bankruptcy or death to bring the outbreak under control. The government must improve the compensation package to cover all workers right now. Another thing is labour and democracy activists demand no more the state of emergency because workers are starving and the situation of the pandemic is under control.

P.S.

- Circulated by the International Bureau Socialist Party of Malaysia / Parti Sosialis Malaysia (PSM)?