

Shahzad Ahmed – a systemic murder?

by S Arutchelvan

COMMENT | When the TikTok video of a man claiming that his boss did not pay his wages for five months and news that he had committed suicide went viral, I was careful not to forward it because, in this world of deception, such news perhaps may not be true.

But when finally the truth was exposed and the reality sank in, it was really tragic and painful. *M alaysiakini*

reported that a Pakistani man Shahzad Ahmed (

above

) was

[found dead](#)

at a worksite along Jalan Ampang in Kuala Lumpur on April 17. His video was real and he did not fake his suffering.

He came here to work, perhaps borrowed much money and when his wages were not paid, he took his own life. He came here looking to continue living and ended up dead. He was only 30. He may not be the first, but can he be the last?

It was reported that a total of 266 people committed suicide nationwide during the movement control order restrictions from March 18 to Oct 30, which works out to 30 suicides per month or one every day during the period. The main contributing factor was debt caused by job losses and family problems.

Because of his death, the human resource minister on 29 April announced that an [e-wages system](#) will be implemented which can track real-time wages. Thank you, Shahzad Ahmed for making this possible. This year's May Day should be dedicated to you. Your death was our gain.

His viral video will haunt us. It showed a boss and a worker, living in two different worlds. The haves and the have-nots. It is the world we live in. The Covid-19 virus saw no discrimination as it infected people from different religions, ethnicities and classes equally. But do all of us live in the same bubble?

While workers struggle to make ends meet, the super-rich have another struggle to contend with. They struggle with how to spend their money which is in abundance. That is why we see income gaps increasing during the pandemic, we see stock markets doing well as some people go on a shopping spree.

This crisis discriminates. Some Malaysians get their daily tonic by posting videos on social media to highlight how they are discriminated against by other ethnic groups. But many fail to see how the system discriminates against the poor irrespective of ethnicity.

During the pandemic, people were baffled as the stock market was soaring while the real economy remained crippled. The pandemic has exposed that small businesses and low-income workers who do essential work suffer while the big players do well as they benefit disproportionately from low-interest rates and the economic slump.

The capitalist mantra

Every capitalist crisis makes the pyramid sharper - misery for the majority and boom time for a minority.

A researcher from Khazanah Research Institute highlighted the fact that disadvantaged groups are [most vulnerable](#) in this pandemic as underlying inequalities affect the distribution of health outcomes.

He said, “It is often observed that poverty breeds ill-health, while ill-health perpetuates poverty. Ill health diminishes incomes and increases healthcare costs. Low incomes contribute to ill health via a multiplicity of deprivations such as inadequate healthcare and unsanitary living conditions.”

During good times and bad times, the one mantra which is always consistent in all seasons is the capitalist reasoning for why wages must be kept low. Each time the minimum wage needs to be reviewed, the hymn is replayed.

Recently, a journalist highlighted to me that trash collectors working for a Selangor government-linked company (GLC) went on strike after a new agreement saw them lose as much as 66 percent of their allowances. Imagine rubbish collection, an essential service not impacted by the crisis, yet these heroes who do these 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs are told to take a pay cut.

After some convincing, they went back to work. While top earners in GLCs earn huge wages, they still have the heart to cut the wages of the poor in order to maintain their own lifestyles.

The last minimum wage order was gazetted on Jan 10, 2020, and came into operation on Feb 1, 2020. This means the next review will be in February 2022, which is less than 10 months away. Do you expect the minimum wage to go up or will you hear the evergreen mantra once again?

Both Pakatan Harapan and BN in the last election promised that the minimum wage would be increased to RM1,500. Now it looks like the pandemic has come to the rescue.

Now, the bosses are again quick to ensure that wages are suppressed and Covid-19 is the best excuse. What is worse is that they have successfully lobbied the government not to enforce the amended Workers' Minimum Standards and Housing and Amenities Act 1990.

Eight lifetimes

Previously, the human resources minister did some brave exposure by showing the terrible housing conditions of these workers' hostels, claiming that they were [not fit](#) for humans to live in. But he suddenly made a U-turn and succumbed to the demands of the capitalist class.

The pandemic will help them rationalise that the minimum wage should not be increased. Nobody will dare to talk about a review because to have a job itself is seen as a luxury.

It was reported that new graduates recorded a decrease in monthly income with most of them only earning between RM1,001 and RM1,500 in 2020 compared to RM2,001-RM2,500 in 2019. This was [revealed](#) by the Statistics Department's chief Mohd Uzir Mahidin.

Only Cuepacs have asked for a minimum wage of RM1,800 so that civil servants can earn at least RM2,510, above the poverty line. Unlike private-sector workers, they can always play on their leverage as the general election looms. The same cannot be said for other workers.

On March 23, it was reported that Malaysia's top bankers received pay hikes and bonuses despite a gloomy 2020. *The Malaysian Reserve* reported that at least three of those bankers received more than a 10 percent pay hike while others received remunerations in bonuses and perks. AmBank's AMMB Holdings Bhd CEO took home RM6.64 million in 2020 compared to RM4.2 million in 2019.

Malayan Banking Bhd's (Maybank) head honcho got a 10.2 percent increase in salary in 2020 compared to RM8.43 million in 2019. Now he gets RM9.4 million and if we break this down to a monthly income, it works out to RM783,333 a month and a daily wage of around RM26k. That would be 21 months of minimum wage

A senior cleaner in Hospital Bahagia, Tanjung Rambutan who has 30 years of service is paid only RM1,100 per month. Yet our legislation, the contract system and crony contractors will ensure wages are kept low. It would take her 712 years, or eight lifetimes, to get the monthly salary of the Maybank CEO in the year of the pandemic.

We talk daily about why wages must be kept low. Why the economy will not allow minimum wages to be increased, why workers need to take a pay cut and why someone like Shahzad Ahmed had to die.

Covid-19 has taught us many lessons but perhaps the biggest is that there is something terribly wrong with our value system and our morality.

Source: Malaysiakini

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