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Reflections on Collective Insecurity and Virtual Resistance in the times of COVID-19 in Malaysia

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Abstract

Environments of human insecurity are a widespread problem in our globalised world, particularly for migrant workers, one of the most vulnerable groups in society today. These experiences of insecurity have been heightened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we examine the collective experience of insecurity among migrant workers in Malaysia. In our analysis, we outline collective insecurity at two levels: the micro level of migrant workers' daily, subjective experiences of insecurity; and the macro level, in which insecurity is a consequence of structural forces, specifically the globalisation of labour. These two levels interact symbiotically, producing states of insecurity that are concretely experienced as anxiety and fear. Migrant workers in Malaysia also practice agency through small forms of resistance that they use to bolster one another and reduce their insecure experiences. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Movement Control Order (MCO) in Malaysia, migrant workers have been further marginalised by the state, but they have also become connected to one another through acts of solidarity and resistance. However, the sustainability of these forms remains unclear.

Keywords: collective insecurity; virtual resistance; Malaysia; COVID-19; migrant workers; migration

Introduction

No one escapes insecurity today. Environments of insecurity created by conflict have become a basic human experience in our increasingly globalised world. Those who experience more conflict at the micro (individual), mezzo (household, community), and macro (state, nation) levels are subject to higher amounts of perceived insecurity (Sirkeci, 2009). This article is an attempt to interrogate the environment of human insecurity experienced by migrant workers in Malaysia, where the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the tension across the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of conflict to come to the fore. We argue that migrants experience collective insecurity, which has intensified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cohen, 2020). Further, we argue that Malaysian migrants have developed forms of resistance in response to their collective insecurity, which have also become more pronounced in the context of Coronavirus.

Previous studies on human insecurity have incorporated frameworks from early security studies, focusing on broad concepts such as nation-states, sovereignty, territoriality, and nationalism, following the principle of Westphalian sovereignty (Vietti & Scribner, 2013). In security studies, migration is often examined at the macro level of institutions, organisations, and

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nation-states and thus, ‘securitisation’ bias becomes dominant. Within this framework, migration is defined as a security problem that needs to be addressed through institutional and organisational responses from the state.

This article defines insecurity outside the prism of security studies. Here, insecurity is an expression of fear, anxiety and uncertainty caused by a lack of social protection. We argue that although migrants in Malaysia have different backgrounds and personal experiences with insecurity, as migrants, they share common environments of insecurity, resulting in “collective insecurity,” a term we outline in this paper. To understand migrant workers’ experience of collective insecurity, we first look at how migrants experience environments of insecurity at the micro-level. We then connect these micro-level subjectivities to the macro-realities of state power and its apparatuses. Our investigation provides insights into the minute, taken-for-granted ruptures, tensions, fears, conflicts and uncertainties that migrant workers navigate while they attempt to negotiate with macro-level power structures for increased security. In times of crisis, these negotiations become direr as migrants respond to different experiences of insecurity, including hunger, unemployment, and deportation, brought on by emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This article also investigates the forms of resistance that are currently possible and whether they are sustainable within the context of challenging social, religious, and political milieus in Malaysia.

The observations in this study are based on our ongoing research and engagement with migrant workers in Malaysia from Indonesia and the Philippines, with a focus on workers in the domestic and service industries. Migrant insecurity in Malaysia has been the focus of our research and writing for several years prior to the COVID outbreak. Although environments of insecurity prevail in migration contexts, these insecurities have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study shows how the collective insecurity of migrants in Malaysia pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic and why this insecurity must continue to be interrogated in the post-pandemic era.

Framing Collective Insecurity and Collective Resistance

Our analysis is guided by a two-pronged understanding of insecurity as both a) a psychological/subjective emotional state and b) the absence of adequate protection through policy measures and state interventions. Although migrants experience these two factors of insecurity individually, they are also common to the migrant experience in Malaysia. The result is a “collective insecurity” experienced amongst migrant workers in Malaysia. In this section, we outline the ways in which insecurity can be a collective experience for a population. We also examine how the response to migrant workers’ intensified insecurity during the pandemic has been a collective one. Through small, united actions, migrant workers and their surrounding communities in Malaysia have helped one another survive during the current COVID-19 crisis. We do not see these actions as a mere response to their environment of insecurity. Instead, we view these tiny, invisible acts as “resistance” because they enabled migrant workers to challenge, reframe, and renegotiate their insecure situations as the pandemic continued. Migrant workers were conscious of their vulnerable and insecure status in Malaysia before the onset of the pandemic. The global health crisis only made this consciousness of insecurity and vulnerability clear to everyone, including the Malaysian citizens, inducing both overt and covert organizing on behalf of migrant communities. Thus, the actions that migrant workers and others are taking to survive more closely resemble resistance than responses to insecurity.

Cohen (2020) argues that insecurity takes many forms and thus it should be modelled as a continuum that tracks time, space, and physicality. Examining time and space allows us to see the



full context of how insecurity is created and how people make decisions in response to their situations, including the decision to migrate. Although insecurity springs from fear, anxiety and uncertainty, it is also a physical experience with embodied burdens. Further, Cohen (2020: 406) reminds us that experiences of security and insecurity are relative and as such, “insecurity is a way to represent the collapse of security through time and in response to the assumption of security that may (or may not) have existed, but that nevertheless become concrete and real through history.” Although this paper focuses on migrant workers’ insecurity in Malaysia, their experience of insecurity is not limited to their current situation. Migrant workers experience insecurity within their own households even before they decide to embark on a migration journey (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Poverty, joblessness, and lack of opportunities for upward mobility are just a few examples of the various personal circumstances that push them to consider labour migration. Migration becomes a strategy to overcome these “push factors” or what Del Rosario and Rigg (2019) refer to as “conditions of precarity.”

However, once migrant workers arrive in receiving countries, their experiences of insecurity do not disappear. Instead insecurity transforms in relation to migrant workers’ life in their new home. Chung and Mau (2014) emphasise that both institutional and contextual factors are important for the achievement of security in material and non-material ways. Security has a large psychological component that is linked to feelings of safety in a particular environment, but security can also be defined by material factors such as economic achievement and political protection. Migrant workers experience the subjective state of insecurity individually and through the lens of their own personal experiences. However, by examining their common material environments of insecurity, we can understand how migrant workers in a receiving country also experience insecurity as a collective population.

Hacker (2006: 20) argues that “insecurity requires real risk that threatens real hardship.” The widespread joblessness, job displacement, and unemployment caused by the COVID-19 offer a robust example of a material environment of insecurity which we can compare with migrant workers’ pre-COVID experiences and conditions in their material environments. Economic insecurity, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2008: vi), arises from the “exposure of individuals, communities and countries to adverse events, and from their inability to cope with and recover from the costly consequences of those events.” COVID-19 is not the only “adverse event” migrant workers experience in the context of their working lives. Thus the collective insecurity migrant workers experience cannot be reduced to “economic insecurity.” In addition to intensifying workers’ economic insecurity, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the crux of migrant workers’ insecurity in receiving countries: lack of material and non-material protections.

Migrant workers are easy targets for discriminatory practices because of how they are perceived in many receiving-societies. Bauman (2016) reveals that in Europe, for example, the ‘migration crisis’ has triggered a deluge of racism and xenophobia, thus creating divisions of “insiders/outsideers”, “us/them”, and “all the others.” This phenomenon is consistent with earlier research on migration and discrimination, such as Hall’s (1978) investigation into ‘moral panic’ and Michael Bakhtin’s concept of ‘cosmic fear’ (in Bauman 1998). These terms describe cases in which migrants are depicted as taking away job opportunities intended for citizens, the “insiders,” and “rightful” recipients of rights. Foucault’s notion of “biopolitics” asks us to consider where these depictions come from and direct our attention to the state’s role in enabling discrimination toward migrant workers. Although the state recognizes the need for migrant workers to perform low-wage

labour, governments also use policy to assert their power over foreign workers by controlling where they are allowed to be, the types of labour they are allowed to perform, and whether they deserve to be treated the same way as citizens. Political policies, or lack thereof, create and reinforce societal divides between citizens and non-citizens. These divisions are powerful, as evidenced by the extensive cognitive dissonance people are willing to maintain in order to preserve the social order. For example, foreign workers are often viewed as “dirty,” yet society allows them to work as domestic workers as well as serve in restaurants, eating stalls or big malls where cleanliness and hygiene are required.

The lack of protective policies for migrant workers exacerbates their insecurities in material and non-material ways and is achieved through several “modalities”: poor employment conditions (Lumayag, 2018, 2020a, 2020b; Kassim, 2013); restrictions against the formation of labour unions (Piper, 2013, 2015; Piper et al., 2016); lack of social protection mechanisms (Piper and Uhlin, 2002); access/(or lack of) to legal redress (Piper and Uhlin, 2002; Sadiq, 2005); racism, moral panic, and xenophobia (Sadiq, 2005; Lyons, 2007); weak governance on bribery and corruption; and weak worker protections from labour-sending governments.

The tendency to leave migrant’s rights unaddressed by global and national institutions is the result of institutional failures at all levels and a lack of political will to respond to the human costs involved in temporary contract migration (Chi, 2008, as cited in Piper et al., 2016). It is also indicative of the downward spiral in labour standards occurring globally (Munck, 2002, as cited in Piper et al., 2016). However, it is possible that the lack of government protections for migrants is not simply a matter of negligence. When we examine all the ways insecurity is institutionalised for migrant workers, we are forced to ask the question: should we categorize injurious policies and lack of protection as “institutional failure” or is it more accurate to describe it as intentional harm being inflicted on behalf of capital?

Since the onset of COVID-19, the term “biopolitics” has taken on a new meaning for migrant workers in Malaysia as state control over peoples’ bodies has increased. In addition to limiting peoples’ mobility, the government has also been limiting who has access to aid and resources during pandemic. These new policies have had a severe impact on daily survival for migrant workers. In many ways, the pandemic has opened peoples’ eyes to the extent of migrant workers’ vulnerability and made their collective insecurity increasingly difficult to ignore or go unaddressed.

Migrant workers in Malaysia have engaged in resistance against the heightened environments of insecurity created by COVID-19 and the government’s response. We argue that in these insecure settings, migrant resistance is a community-based form of active engagement that is expressed in micro-activities in response to threats to basic survival. The current crisis provides opportunities for new ways of understanding the small, invisible political actions of vulnerable groups.

Past research on resistance has focused on direct confrontations with power (Foucault, 1997; Constable, 1997; Parreñas, 2001). Seminal studies by Scott (1985, 1990), Ong (1987), Constable (1997), Chin (1998), and Lumayag (2018) demonstrate the range of forms that resistance can take among vulnerable groups. Scott’s (1985, 1990) focus is on everyday resistance among peasants in rural Malaysia, while Constable (1997), Chin (1998), and Lumayag (2018) examine how the state uses its power to reduce the opportunities for marginalised groups to confront the state. In all these studies, marginalised, vulnerable minorities conduct their resistance in the open, employing a physical, spatial, and/or social ‘presence,’ such as direct confrontation with their powerful employers.



Since the introduction of the internet, however, marginalised groups have been able to engage in resistance through a new and different platform where a crucial form of activism is information sharing (see earlier studies by Anderson, 2013 on the Arab Spring; Costa, 2013 on Turkey; Miller et al., 2016). Altogether, the widespread use of the internet becomes collective action, rather than an activity conducted and carried out by individual workers. When migrant workers use common platforms to share their experiences of insecurity, the individual sharing of experiences motivates others to extend their assistance and understand their common situations of insecurity. Migrant workers, who are subordinated, oppressed, and socially excluded, find strength in their own numbers. Echoing Scott, this online presence becomes an instance of the deployment of “weapons of the weak,” especially throughout the current pandemic in which migrant workers have felt isolated and marginalised.

Collective Insecurity Among Migrant Workers

In the Southeast Asian region, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand are key destination countries for migrant labour. Migrant labour makes up a significant portion of the economy in Southeast Asia. Malaysia and Thailand are unique in that they are both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries. Growing from approximately 500,000 migrant workers at the turn of the millennium, today Malaysia has about five to six million migrant workers employed across various industries, primarily in the construction, manufacturing, and service sectors.

Malaysia is a particularly interesting case for an investigation of migrant insecurity because of the country’s strong supply and demand for global migrant labour. Migrants have been entering Malaysia through legal and illegal channels for several decades. Filipinos and Indonesians make up the majority of migrants into Malaysia, even as Malaysians themselves constitute migrant labour in neighbouring Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan. Meanwhile in Malaysia, the economy has been dependent on immigrants and migrant workers since colonial rule (Kassim, 2013; Kaur 2014; Lumayag, 2018). For example, the Malaysian plantation industry relied on labour migrants from southern India during British colonial rule and continues to rely on migrant labour today from Indonesia and Bangladesh.

Despite its central position in Asian migration, Malaysia lacks a comprehensive migration policy, a contributing factor to insecurity among migrants within the country. The Malaysian government has yet to address several key workplace issues that migrants face, including poor working conditions and lack of social protections and welfare measures, not to mention migrants’ civil and political rights.

Thus, migrant insecurity in Malaysia is epitomized by an ongoing tension surrounding job insecurity. This tension can be seen in the interactions between migrants and the state, including recruitment and employment processes, as well as the unclear pathways to the right to redress among others. We do not argue that migrant insecurity only takes this shape in Malaysia. In fact, Piper et al. (2016: 1096) note that, “conditions of precarity starts from migrants’ home country...The fundamental problem is not only the insecurity and vulnerability associated with migrant labour, but the lack of opportunities, rights, security and protection at home that causes large segments of the labour force to resort to migration as a survival strategy or in pursuit of aspirations for social upward mobility.”

Insecurities among migrant workers in Malaysia became more pronounced during the three-month-long partial lockdown, known as the MCO (Movement Control Order). After the Perikatan

Nasional (PN) government took over the national leadership (23 February 2020), the MCO was declared and implemented. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of Malaysian citizens, non-Malaysians citizens - especially migrant workers - were impacted even more. Not only were migrants involved in the cluster event responsible for a large portion of COVID-19 infections, they were also excluded from the relief package administered by the PN government during the MCO.

The coronavirus infection in Malaysia spiked in March after 12,000 attendees of an Islamic religious movement called the Tabligh⁴, including about 2000 Rohingya refugees, gathered in a Sri Petaling mosque in Kuala Lumpur on 27 February-01 March for their annual regional meeting. This cluster was partly responsible for the increase in COVID-19 cases in West Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. The Malaysian government found it challenging to conduct contact tracing for such a large group, especially the undocumented Tabligh members. As of 24 May, there have been 115 recorded deaths in Malaysia and over 7000 cases of infection, with an estimated 50% of infected cases linked to the Sri Petaling cluster.

When the MCO was declared, the PN government put forward a massive relief package of RM250 billion (approximately \$58 million US dollars) to cushion the negative economic impact of COVID-19 on the citizens of the country. The relief package was extended to people in the lowest economic category of B40⁵ ("bottom 40%") up to the employers of small and business enterprises. However, non-citizens, including both documented and undocumented immigrants, migrants and refugees, were not eligible for aid from the relief package. As the MCO progressed, migrant workers requested food aid from Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and friendship networks. As daily wage workers in various industries, most migrants were stuck in their flats without employment throughout the MCO and worked for some employers who did not offer to pay or feed them during the period they were without work.

Virtual resistance as a form of activism: MCO and COVID-19

Historically, migrant workers have been at the forefront while challenging their conditions of vulnerability and precarity. Across time and space, workers have always negotiated their positions, more so in the digital era. The internet and other digital technologies have enabled migrant workers to connect with broader networks of people to help them fight for better conditions. Here we reflect on what transpired among the migrant communities in Malaysia during the MCO as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This section is organized around three themes of resistance action: 1) Resistance through aid wherein community leaders and NGOs worked together to provide resources to migrants and block the state's attempts to use the MCO to identify, arrest, and deport undocumented workers; 2) Resistance through networks in which friends, employers, other migrants helped migrants survive during the MCO; and 3) Resistance through redundancy in which migrant workers feigned ignorance about aid to get additional aid. These themes form part of the ongoing resistance acts of migrant workers, which may transform the landscape of collective insecurity.

⁴ Tabligh is a religious movement with vast numbers of followers from all over Asia, which makes it a major social force underpinned by religious belief.

⁵ B40 is a category of household whose mean income is RM2,537 and a median income of RM2,629



Resistance Through Aid

The first small form of resistance observed on behalf of migrant workers involved community leaders and NGO's working together to provide aid to migrants during the MCO and blocking the state's attempts to use the MCO to "potentially" identify, locate and deport undocumented workers. Two local-based migrant NGOs, Our Journey and AMMPO⁶ (Asosasyon ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino Overseas Malaysia), started organising the distribution of food aid packages⁷ to Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers around Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and the suburbs within the immediate vicinity of Kuala Lumpur. Everyday both groups received requests that ranged from food to diapers, formula milk, and sanitary pads (see for example Figure 1). The Our Journey teams purchased and distributed relief packages; meanwhile, AMMPO screened through the aid list, with names, locations and mobile numbers of affected migrants. As the food aid continued during the period of the MCO, Our Journey negotiated and collaborated with foreign embassies, including the Indonesian and Bangladeshi embassies, to reach out to affected thousands of migrant workers.

Figure 1. An AMMPO member packing food essentials to be distributed around Kuala Lumpur



Source: Lumayag, 2020(a). Aliran, 12 April 2020.

⁶ Association of Filipino Workers Overseas

⁷ Food aid packages contained 5 kg of rice, 1 liter cooking oil, 5 cans sardines, 1 kg sugar, 1 pack of 3-in-1 coffee, 1 kg noodles, 5 packs instant noodles, 1 tray (30 pcs) eggs, onions and garlic

Because movement was severely restricted during the MCO period, the implementation of aid programs was strictly monitored and proved to be extremely difficult and challenging for the NGOs delivering aid packages. To pass through police roadblocks, the NGO teams needed to show a permit issued by a foreign embassy allowing resource distribution to their nationals. During the first week of the movement restriction, NGOs were required to send all donations to the government for distribution through the Department of Social Welfare. After less than a week, the PN government relented and withdrew the restriction due to widespread protests from NGOs who were especially worried about the safety of undocumented migrant workers.

During the MCO, the government promised a moratorium on arrests and detention for millions of undocumented workers. However, this moratorium did not occur. On 01 May, organised arrests and detention occurred in downtown Kuala Lumpur along Jalan Masjid India where Malaya Mansion and Selangor Mansion are located. This area is home to the cluster that was thought to have started the spike of coronavirus infection among migrant workers. Close to 3,300 foreign workers were tested and 586 of them were undocumented workers. Although none of the undocumented workers tested positive for coronavirus, they were all sent to the nearest immigration depot to be deported. This action against migrant workers triggered online protests coordinated by labour unions, migrant communities, and NGOs arguing that raids, detentions and deportations were counterproductive. The United Nations office in Kuala Lumpur condemned the arrests in a widely shared press statement and offered to find alternatives to detention.

The global network of migration groups engaged in advocacy, organised webinar discussions about human rights issues, and suggested potential strategies should the arrests continue during the MCO. The plan to centralise the distribution of food aid to citizens and non-citizens was vehemently resisted by local groups and civil society organisations. Those opposed to state intervention or “assistance” in relief efforts feared the government would attempt to control and dominate the relief operations as well as use the aid distribution to monitor the locations of undocumented workers.

When the Philippine Embassy urged the distribution teams of Our Journey and AMMPO to provide them with a list of recipients before the embassy would release its letter of consent allowing food distribution to Filipino nationals, both groups reacted strongly against this demand. Rather than work with embassies directly, undocumented workers preferred to rely on migrant groups who connected with the embassy that represented the sending country (e.g., Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh). Many undocumented workers preferred not even to be seen receiving food packs, but some relented since their masks largely preserved their anonymity.

In Sarawak, undocumented workers in massage and beauty salons, restaurants, and construction experienced a work stoppage, which made it extremely difficult for them to survive. Sarawak holds a relatively high number of undocumented foreign workers, estimated at around 300,000 in 2015 (The Malay Mail, 11 April 2015). During the MCO, the state government seemed to downplay the presence of undocumented population in Sarawak. Nonetheless, during the third week of the MCO, two community leaders received persistent calls allegedly from someone representing a formal institution inquiring whether the Philippine Embassy was planning on sending money to purchase food for its nationals working in Sarawak, and if the community leaders wanted the caller’s assistance with the food deliveries. Before these suspicious phone calls, the plan was for the community leaders to distribute the deliveries on their own by visiting the recipients at home. After handing the goods to recipients, the recipients would have their photo taken, and the photo would be uploaded to Facebook for documentation and public sharing.



The calls from the allegedly friendly officers caused the Sarawak community leaders to revise their plans. Instead they made their distribution practice more low profile to protect the identities of recipients and avoid having their food distribution become controlled by the state as it had in Kuala Lumpur. In Kuala Lumpur, where there was strict adherence to movement protocols, a measure passed that stated uniformed personnel had to accompany local distribution teams to each and every location of beneficiaries, which put the security of all undocumented citizens at risk. Thus, in Sarawak, the call from the “friendly” personnel catalysed a shift in distribution practices to avoid further attention from the state. The community leaders negotiated with local grocers to deliver the food packs directly to undocumented workers. They also stopped taking photos and sharing them on Facebook, which is what the Kuala Lumpur teams had done. On Facebook, photo uploads featuring food recipients were swiftly deleted to protect privacy. Most online surveys regarding aid also stopped and people, especially those who were undocumented workers, were warned not to participate in any online surveys unless they had thoroughly vetted the source of the survey. The community leaders were informed again that a “friendly officer” received a call from the embassy informing him of plans to distribute food packs after the MCO. The officer demanded that the authorities be informed if and when further aid was sent to the area.

Although the state used the MCO to further marginalize the already-vulnerable migrant worker population in Malaysia, community leaders, NGOs, and migrant workers used covert online and on-the-ground organising to protect workers’ identities and deliver much needed aid to migrant communities.

Resistance Through Networks

The second small form of resistance observed on behalf of migrant workers involved assistance from neighbourhoods, friends, employers, and other migrant workers. Undocumented Indonesian workers in the construction industry relied mostly on their local friends⁸ to survive. The Indonesian Embassy facilitated the distribution of food aid packages across geographical locations from Kuala Lumpur to Shah Alam, Klang as well as the Selangor areas and states in Western Malaysia. The Indonesian Embassy must have realised that it was impossible to reach out to migrant workers without logistical assistance from civil society groups and migrant communities. One Indonesian group of domestic workers known as PERTIMIG (Persatuan Pekerja Rumah Tangga Indonesia Migran)⁹ in Kuala Lumpur assisted by organising the list of recipients and following up on distribution by keeping the donors of food aid informed. Indonesians represent a higher percentage of undocumented workers because of the shared and porous borders between Indonesia, East Malaysia, and the West Malaysia.

Since non-citizens did not receive any form of assistance from the PN government, migrant workers relied on networks of new friends. Organised based on interests (e.g. sports, religion, regional associations), migrant workers are connected with other Kuala Lumpur-based migrant communities. These communities extended as much help as they could to one another, even if it meant receiving less for themselves. For example, domestic workers who lived with employers quietly sent rations to their other friends across the geographical locations without even leaving the house. These domestic workers used their established Grab or taxi contacts to ferry rations to friends who did not live in their employers’ homes. Sometimes, those live-out friends collected the goods

⁸ Contextually referring to documented Indonesian immigrants who have “better” social position as opposed to undocumented Indonesian immigrants or migrant workers.

⁹ PERTIMIG is Association of Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers

from live-in domestic workers, prepared or cooked them, and then packed the food to be sent to others in need. For example, they baked bread and distributed portions of it to friends.

Migrant workers connected with friends and services in important ways using social media platforms. Most migrant workers have Facebook accounts, but during the MCO, undocumented workers were less active on Facebook, preferring instead to lie low, in case their accounts were being surveilled. WhatsApp became a much more popular social app because it offered more privacy. Some Indonesian workers used their documented friends' names to link to NGOs like Our Journey, AMMPO and PERTIMIG and escaped perceived potential surveillance.

Although Malaysian citizens may have received cash assistance from the Federal and State governments, a number of undocumented internal migrant workers (for example, Sarawakians) who could not access the application via the government online system were left out in the process. Instead, these internal migrants relied on their friendships with other foreign workers. Thus, a small number of internal migrants benefitted from the generosity of fellow migrants, as observed in Sarawak, East Malaysia.

Migrant workers in Malaysia also received much needed assistance from well-meaning Malaysian citizens. In some cases, employers of live-in foreign domestic workers attempted to "adopt" a few migrant workers and their families, providing them with basic foodstuffs to survive through the MCO. Nonetheless, there were also complaints from employees whose employers did not provide food for their workers.

J (name withheld), a 32-year-old, undocumented worker worked in a restaurant for 11 months before the MCO. J considered the husband-wife owners of the restaurant to be good people. However, throughout the MCO, his employers never asked him whether he had food to eat. He has also not been paid since the partial lockdown. We later asked J if he still thought his employers were good people, to which he just kept silent. According to J, he did not want to sound too demanding by asking for anything, because he was afraid that after the MCO he would be fired, which was the case for many of his friends. J wanted to earn enough money to buy a plane ticket and pay the overstaying fee on his compound.

In another situation, M, a full-time domestic worker, was paid half of her monthly salary as part of the employer's negotiation to keep her employed. M confided that she would rather take half her salary than return to the Philippines to join thousands of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) retrenched abroad due to COVID-19.

Another group of five wood furniture makers reported that they experienced hunger, despite the plentiful stocks of rice and piles of noodles in the warehouse owned by their employer. The employer had not offered them anything since the MCO began. When a local religious charity offered them food and RM200 (approximately \$46 US dollars) cash per worker, they were overcome with emotion.

Resistance Through Redundancy

Finally, migrant workers resisted the state and fought off surveillance by looking for redundancies within the aid system. One way workers did this was by denying that they received any form of food assistance from aid organisations even if they had. One group knew that their request for more food assistance would likely be denied by the Philippine government. Yet, when the list reached a migrant advocacy group in Kuala Lumpur, the request was referred to the office



of the Welfare Attaché for the Overseas Welfare Work Association (OWWA) and granted in less than three days. Seventeen families with children received a food pack worth RM40 (approx. \$9 US) each per family. We did an online chat with one of the recipients who said, “We are just testing the waters. If the government gives, well and good; if it doesn’t, at least we tried.” Some workers even capitalise on several friendship networks to be able to receive as much food packages as they could (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A sample of food pack distributed during the first phase of MCO



Source: Lumayag (2020a), Aliran, 12 April 2020.

Conclusion: forging a new engagement through virtual activism?

Amidst abundant threats today, human insecurity is omnipresent. The onset of COVID-19 globally and the ensuing MCO lockdown in Malaysia brought the economy to its knees. Those who have been most affected are daily wage earners, who constitute 85% of migrant workers, working

in small and medium industries, and the foreign domestic workers confined to private homes. Millions of migrant workers are located in non-essential services such as domestic work, beauty salons, hotels, and restaurants. At the lifting of the first phase of the MCO, after two months, some workers were already issued a travel exit pass, while other workers waited it out and reconsidered plans of returning home.

Could the new socio-political landscape as a result of the pandemic give way to a new mode of activist engagement that is more virtually visible? Workers who were able to wait out the crisis survived the critical two months under confinement because of engagement with other migrant communities and new alliances with advocacy groups (Hansen, 2019). Moving forward, can they sustain their virtual political engagement to mitigate insecurities and to improve their work conditions (Gurowitz, 2000; Basok, 2010; Piper et al., 2016)? Will this crisis lay the groundwork to push for more social protection? At the same time, has the pandemic created a deepened digital surveillance that risks civil liberties and rights, just as migrant workers have realised the importance of virtual resistance to achieve change? These questions raise possibilities for generating new knowledge that would help understand the new landscape for human action within the context of a global pandemic.

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