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Modern slavery in Malaysia



Indonesian migrant workers harvest fruits on a palm oil plantation in the Malaysian state of Sabah.
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Malaysia: The British Empire forcibly transported workers from China and India to Malaya. The resulting racism and regressive labor policies persist to this day.

In his 1971 book „War of the Running Dogs“, British novelist Noel Barber described the former British colony Malaya as „one of the most beautiful countries on earth“. He goes on to paint a picture of a peaceful haven where „men of many skins and creeds lived in harmony“ – complete with imperialist paternalism as he labels people as either „gentle“, „industrious“, or „listless“ based solely on their ethnicity.

While the image of Malaysia as a harmonious melting pot has long endured in political rhetoric and national branding, so too have colonial constructions of racial ideology: the fictions of the indolent Malay, the venal Chinese, and the aggressive Indian are legacies that have outlasted the Empire, as the social demographer Charles Hirschman notes in his paper „The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya“.

Workers from China and India were forcibly transported to Malaya

This ideology was first crafted in 19th century colonial capitalist Malaya, when Chinese and Indian workers were found labouring in tin mines, in plantations, on roads, on railways, following British failure to fully absorb Malays into the colonial economy as wage labourers. War demanded tin and rubber, both plentiful in Malaya, and so the colonial powers imported labour from China and India. Work was often fragmented across nationality, and further split by ethnic or caste differences.



Indonesian migrants often attempt to enter Malaysia via illegal routes across the green border in Borneo/Kalimantan — as seen here from the Indonesian Entikong to the Malaysian Tebedu. © Romi Perbawa, all rights reserved

Coolies from China were brought to Malaya in batches, made to perform backbreaking labour, beaten, fed poorly, and denied freedom of movement. Indian labourers, too, were subject to the same suit of abuses: indentured labour, and harsh living and working conditions with worse punishments. These workers were made to work off the debt incurred by passage to Malaysia, although this would prove a Sisyphean task with a wage of just several cents a day. Worker action and protest was met with the most draconian of responses: sackings, deportations, cuts in food rations, and state violence; although over time workers groups slowly eked out better wages and conditions.

Colonial oppression as a blueprint for repressive labour laws

In 1957, the British granted Malaysia „independence“ by handing over power to members of the

Malay elite who were sympathetic to the colonial rulers. However, the measures that Britain had taken to suppress workers and labour movements had long since become a blueprint for the exploitation of labour and a regressive approach to labour law – a hallmark of regions where European colonial powers had previously employed extractive strategies, as the American economist Daron Acemoglu notes in his article „The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation,,.

Authoritarian control and the suppression of labour movements and unions were also hallmarks of colonial administration. The post-colonial continuity of these conditions is evident in today's laws: following uprisings by forcibly displaced and immigrant workers, the British regime in the 1940s enacted ordinances that granted unlimited powers to ban unions. Union leaders deemed „communist sympathizers“ were executed.



Plywood production in a factory of the Veracity Corporation in the Malaysian state of Sabah: Most workers come from Eastern Indonesia. © Romi Perbawa, all rights reserved

Up to this day, migrant workers are disallowed from forming new unions or becoming office-bearers in citizen-founded unions despite making up an estimated 2.2 million of the total 14.4 million employees in the labour force. Those found to be active in union movements are summarily dismissed and deported. Estimates of IndustriALL place the number of unionised migrant workers at a mere 10 per cent of the whole, with some forced to sign legally unenforceable agreements pledging not to join unions.

Migrant domestic workers are excluded from various protections in the Employment Act and therefore cannot legally unionise. This creates ripe conditions for precarity and abuse among documented and undocumented (mostly female) migrant workers, which some estimate could be as high as 5.5 million people. These workers hail from Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, among others.

Colonial racial ideology is still reflected in everyday

prejudices today

Today's migrant workers, upon whom Malaysia is so heavily reliant, undertake jobs classified as „3D“: dirty, difficult, and dangerous. These positions are unpopular among locals. However, by mistreating its foreign workforce, the country is perpetuating colonial-era practices, as political scientists Kamal Sadiq and Gerasimos Tsourapas argue in their study „Labour coercion and commodification: from the British Empire to postcolonial migration states“. They contend that Malaysia, as a postcolonial migration state, „reproduces colonial tropes through the surveillance and control of segmented migration flows that redistribute labor for the global economy“.



The children of Indonesian migrant workers in Keningau, Malaysia, receive lessons in a private home to avoid raids by the immigration police. © Romi Perbawa, all rights reserved

Similar to the absorbed racial ideologies of the colonizers, these workers endure commonplace and normalised xenophobia, both institutional and societal. During the Covid-19-pandemic, migrant workers were regularly rounded up, hosed down, and carted off to overcrowded detention centres. Migrant communities were placed under more stringent movement control measures and even had their residences cordoned off with barbed wire. Online, migrant workers are regularly ridiculed and mocked for being in public spaces during their days off. Media coverage of foreign workers involved in crime is often sensationalised despite only 0.1 per cent of foreigners being detained for crimes based on annual statistics.

Forced labour and modern-day slavery are a perennial and pressing issue, with workers earning a pittance and enduring poor living conditions. Categorised as Tier 2 in US State Department's 2024 Trafficking in Persons Report, Malaysia has come under fire for practices indicative of forced labour: „violating contracts, wage fraud, assault, threats of deportation, the imposition of significant debts, and passport retention“ remain widespread.

Elites continue „coloniality without colonialism“



Illegal migrants from Indonesia are being deported from the Malaysian port of Tunon Taka Nunukan to their home country. © Romi Perbawa, all rights reserved

The parallels between present-day treatment of migrant workers and the British government's capitalist colonialism in Malaya are a clear example of postcolonial continuity. With the perpetuation of race-based economic plans and policies that resulted in crony capitalism, elites have supplanted colonial masters to perpetuate the same „conditions of coloniality without colonialism“ as criticized by Malaysian author Syed Farid Alatas. Political scientist Christopher Choong emphasizes that it is about continuing the „postcolonial national repertoire“ of neoliberal success. Labour coercion and commodification were hallmarks of colonial capitalism, imperial legacies that are maintained both through legislative holdovers and institutional memory.

Old interviews with Chinese forced labourers who were deported to the region during the colonial era document how they were promised a good life upon recruitment. Reading today's news reports about human trafficking, the parallels are clear: agencies lure workers from other countries with the promise of earning a substantial income that could lift them and their families out of poverty for generations.

In Malaysia, contemporary attitudes towards migrant labourers are, like colonial attitudes in the same regard, characterised by exploitation and control of what is seen as a cheap labour force necessary for economic development. The legacy of empire has extended into modern-day policymaking, enduring by taking on different shapes but resulting in the same consequences to marginalised bodies.

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Romi Perbawa

Romi Perbawa (<https://romiperbawa.com/>) ist ein freischaffender Fotograf, der sich auf Langzeit-Dokumentationen spezialisiert hat. Seine Fotos wurden unter anderem in Stern, Time Magazine, Guardian und De Standaard veröffentlicht.



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