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By Robert Campion
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Rubber glove factories become COVID-19 epicentres in Malaysia

Workers are fighting the world's largest medical glove manufacturer, Top Glove, over unsanitary working conditions that have led to the largest, active coronavirus hotspots in Malaysia. Damning exposures by workers have revealed sweltering and unsafe conditions, with lack of protections, no social distancing and packed dormitories.

According to statistics from Malaysia's Ministry of Health, 5,700 of Top Glove's 11,215 employees at just one of its manufacturing centres have tested positive for coronavirus since November. For a number of days, the company's 21,000 employees accounted for over half of Malaysia's new cases. The company was forced to submit to staggered shutdowns of its factories, largely in the Meru region.



Entrance to Top Glove Tower in Selangor, Malaysia (Photo: Wikimedia)

Responsible for 60 percent of the world's disposable gloves, the company reported on December 16 that it had tested 10,000 employees, of whom 93 percent had recovered, but declined to specify how many had tested positive. It also announced the reopening of its factories despite days earlier confirming its first COVID-19 death, 29-year-old security guard Yam Narayan Chaudhary, who was based at a manufacturing facility in Klang, 40 kilometres west of the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Chaudhary died in a Selangor province hospital due to COVID-related pneumonia and lung fibrosis but was not admitted to the hospital for three days owing to the decisions of management. Why this occurred has not been explained, although it is of piece with Top Glove's exploitative conditions.

No condolences or information were passed on to his family in western Nepal.

"Our whole family was very much shocked," his brother Bhabindra told the *New York Times*. "He always tried to assure us that he is quite young and healthy, so nothing could happen to him with COVID. We feel it's Top Glove's failure that they are not able to protect their workers."

The outbreaks emerged after months of the company posting record profits. Top Glove took advantage of being exempted from Malaysia's lockdown earlier this year, at the insistence of European and other governments. From September to November, its net profits surged to 2.38 billion ringgit (\$US584 million)—more than 20 times higher than the equivalent period last year.

Top Glove also became the second-largest listed company on the Malaysian stock market. Its share price rose 300 percent. Its shareholders include Malaysian and Norwegian state pension funds, as well as US-based Blackrock, the world's largest asset manager.

This has come at the direct expense of its workers, who are subjected to low wages and long stretches of overtime. Collectively, Top Glove employees produce 200 million disposable gloves a day, but each receive roughly \$300 a month in salary, and are forced to work 72-hour work weeks on occasion, making them tired and more vulnerable to the virus.

Employees reported becoming soaked in sweat after working only an hour due to the lack of air conditioning. Instead of being given replacement masks, they are supplied only with one a day.

Even to gain work at Top Glove in the first place, some migrant workers are forced into debt bondage by having to pay fees of \$5,000, which can take months or years to recoup. Dormitories are crowded, with as many as 20 in one room on bunk beds.

Throughout the pandemic, the company has ignored safety protocols, suppressed information and intimidated its largely migrant workforce.

One whistleblower, another migrant worker from Nepal, Yubaraj Khadka, took photos as far back as May of workers crowding into the factory. According to Reuters, photos show dozens of workers less than a metre apart waiting for their temperature checks before starting their night shifts.

“There was no one-metre distancing. That’s what I wanted to show,” Khadka told the *New York Times*, “even at the factory, after the first few months (of infections in Malaysia), the social distancing markers were thrown out.”

Khadka commented: “The Top Glove management’s mentality is that migrant labourers are very low. If I could talk to the bosses, I would say, ‘Treat us better, like humans.’”

Instead, Khadka was fired in September after the company scoured its CCTV footage for months. Upon his termination, the management confiscated his phone.

Workers also reported being denied the results from their COVID tests. According to the newspaper, six were not given their results this month, even though one of them was hospitalised for six days.

Malaysia is in the midst of its third and largest wave of coronavirus cases. There were 2,018 recorded infections on Monday—roughly double the daily average in November—bringing the total confirmed cases to 95,327. One death occurred, taking the toll to 438.

Top Glove is just the tip of the iceberg. Conditions are reportedly worse at smaller Malaysian glove makers. One company, Brightway Holdings, had its factory in Kajang district raided by government officials. They found workers living in cramped, dirty shipping containers stacked behind the premises. Most were migrant workers.

Smaller glove maker Kossan Rubber Industries this week announced the results of testing since December 4, which recorded 990 COVID-19 cases at a plant in Klang. Employees are now undergoing quarantine and the plant has been closed until December 30.

Along with factories, clusters are emerging in similar conditions in prisons and detention centres.

The Malaysian authorities have launched 19 investigations to determine whether Top Glove has violated labour standards, but this just an effort to save face and stifle popular discontent. In neighbouring Singapore, the government announced last week that 47 percent of its migrant workforce, or 152,000 workers, had contracted the virus, as compared to about 4,000 of Singapore’s citizens.

The fight against the virus in Malaysia and internationally requires the ending of the unsafe and exploitative conditions that become vectors for the pandemic. This requires a globally unified struggle of the international working class, not just against individual companies but against the profit system itself.

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