

Unity in Uncertainty with *Tawakkal* for Green Company Workers' Fight for Justice with Kesatuan Pekerja-Pekerja Perkilangan Perusahaan Makanan

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Abstract

In 2018, workers at Green Manufacturing Company in Petaling Jaya were thrust into uncertainty when the company announced the sale of its factory to Light Green Company. Offered the options of transferring to other Green Company plants, joining Light Green Company under similar terms, or facing redundancy, employees were left anxious and confused by vague assurances. Amid growing fears, senior worker Razak and his colleagues sought support from the Kesatuan Pekerja-Pekerja Perkilangan Perusahaan Makanan (KPPPM), a union established in 1970 to protect workers' rights. Led by experienced advocates like Shahul Hamid, KPPPM organized the workers, documented their grievances, and educated them about their rights under the collective agreement. Through solidarity meetings and strategic guidance, the union amplified the workers' voices as tensions with management intensified. The dispute escalated to the Industrial Court, where KPPPM argued against perceived coercion and highlighted violations of workers' rights, while the court emphasized justice and industrial harmony. This case illustrates the power of unity, the critical role of unions in addressing labor disputes, and KPPPM's enduring legacy in safeguarding Malaysia's workforce amid evolving corporate and social challenges.

Keywords: Trade disputes; Collective agreements; Industrial action.

Introduction

The story begins in Petaling Jaya, at a factory belonging to Green Manufacturing Company. For decades, the factory was the lifeblood of its employees, producing

culinary sauces, milk powder, chilled dairy, and beloved chocolate drinks. The workers, bound by shared dedication and camaraderie, took pride in their labor. Yet in 2018, their world was upended when Green Company announced the sale of the factory to Light Green Company. This seismic shift shook the very foundations of their lives.

At an October 2018 town hall meeting, Green Company representatives outlined the new reality: employees could either transfer to other Green Company plants if positions were available, accept employment under Light Green Company with similar benefits, or face redundancy. While the presentation came with assurances that no one would lose their livelihood, the vagueness of the plan sparked confusion. Doubt and fear began to creep into the minds of the workers.

The Role of KPPPM

Amidst this uncertainty, the workers turned to the Kesatuan Pekerja-Pekerja Perkilangan Perusahaan Makanan (KPPPM), a union established in 1970 by Osman Din during Malaysia's turbulent post-May 13th era. Against a backdrop of social tension, KPPPM rose as a beacon of hope for workers in Malaysia's food manufacturing industry.

From its humble beginnings, the union organized 300 workers from three factories, including Premier Milk (M) Sdn. Bhd., Food Specialities Sdn. Bhd., and Federal Flour Mill Bhd (FFM). These pioneers were united by their determination to fight for fair wages, safer working conditions, and dignity for laborers. Over the decades, KPPPM became a formidable force, representing workers across 70 factories with 55 collective agreements and a membership of over 8,000, including 34 women.

KPPPM's history was marked by constant battles with employers, from collective bargaining deadlocks to bold public pickets. One such defining moment occurred in the 1990s when unionized workers picketed against a pineapple processing company, demanding wage increases to improve their standard of living. That picket became a rallying cry for fairness and justice.

Workers Seek Clarity

The uncertainty following Green Company's town hall announcement left the workers reeling. In the meeting room, hands shot up as employees demanded answers.

"Will we still receive the same retirement benefits if we transfer to Light Green?" asked one worker.

"What happens to our years of service?" another pressed.

The responses from management were vague and evasive. The presenters sidestepped specifics, leaving a cloud of anxiety hanging over the room. As employees left the meeting, their confusion turned to frustration.

In the breakroom later that day, the tension was palpable. Razak, a senior employee with 25 years of service, stood to address his colleagues. "We can't go on like this," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "They aren't giving us the answers we need."

How are we supposed to make decisions about our families if we don't even know what's going on?"

"But what can we do, Razak?" asked Amin, a younger worker. "We're just employees. They hold all the cards."

Razak shook his head. "Not if we stand together. We need someone to fight for us, someone who knows the system. We need KPPPM."

The Workers Turn to KPPPM

A week later, a group of workers, led by Razak, approached the KPPPM office on Jalan Klang Lama. The modest office exuded resilience, a testament to decades of labor struggles.

Shahul Hamid, the union's seasoned Secretary-General, greeted them warmly. "What brings you here today?" he asked, sensing their unease.

Razak stepped forward. "We're confused, sir. The company says we have options, but none of them make sense to us. We've tried to get answers, but all we get are more questions."

Shahul listened intently before replying. "I understand. Many workers face situations like this. That's why unions exist—to make sure your voices are heard and your rights are protected."

Amin, still hesitant, spoke up. "But can you really help us? Green Company is so big, and we're just... small."

Shahul smiled reassuringly. "Never underestimate the power of unity. Together, you have a voice. And with KPPPM's support, that voice can create change."

Under Shahul's guidance, the workers began organizing. The union requested detailed clarifications from Green Company and initiated discussions about the employees' rights under the collective agreement. They also held meetings to educate workers on their legal options and boost their confidence in facing the challenges ahead.

Building Solidarity

At one such meeting, Razak spoke to his peers. "I know we're scared. I'm scared too. But this isn't just about us—it's about our families and the years we've given to this company. With KPPPM's help, we'll get the respect and clarity we deserve."

As the union's efforts gained momentum, tensions at the factory escalated. Rumors swirled, and management became increasingly evasive. Still, the workers remained united under KPPPM's leadership.

One evening, as Razak and Amin walked home from a meeting, Amin asked, "Do you think we'll win?"

Razak paused. “Winning doesn’t always mean getting everything we want. Sometimes, it just means standing up and being heard. And we’re doing that now. That’s already a victory.”

The Fight for Justice

The workers’ plight eventually led to formal proceedings. KPPPM, determined to protect the rights of its members, filed a complaint with the Ministry of Human Resources. The case was referred to the Industrial Court, where the stakes were high, and emotions ran deep. In the courtroom, KPPPM’s lawyer, Mr. Tan Lee Kiat, presented the workers’ case with measured urgency.

“Green Company claims to offer choices,” Tan began, his voice resonating through the room. “But these so-called choices come with hidden consequences, leaving employees in a state of fear and confusion. The collective agreement is clear on workers’ rights, and these actions violate the principles of fair treatment and respect.” The company’s lead counsel, Mr. Ray, dismissed the claims with an air of confidence. “Green Company has acted responsibly, ensuring seamless transitions and protecting livelihoods,” he argued. “These allegations are baseless and overlook the company’s extensive efforts to support its employees.”

The tension in the courtroom escalated as witnesses began to testify. Encik Meor Arif, a senior employee, stood at the witness stand, his hands trembling slightly. “We felt trapped,” he testified, his voice heavy with emotion. “We were told we had options, but it didn’t feel like we truly did. The pressure was overwhelming.”

Outside the courtroom, a group of workers, including Razak and Amin, gathered in a small room with Shahul Hamid, KPPPM’s Secretary-General. The atmosphere was thick with uncertainty. “Do you think we’re making progress?” Amin asked, his voice tinged with worry.

Before Shahul could answer, a knock at the door revealed an unexpected visitor—Prime Minister Dato' Seri Anwar Ibrahim. His presence immediately filled the room with a sense of hope and gravity. “I heard about your struggle,” he began, shaking hands with Shahul and the workers. “I want to share a few words with you.”

The workers leaned in, their attention fixed on the Prime Minister. “This is not just about your jobs,” he said, his tone both compassionate and firm. “It is about the dignity of labor and the moral fabric of our society. As I’ve often said, *justice and compassion are the twin pillars of governance*. When we fail to honor these principles in the workplace, we weaken the foundation of our nation.”

The Role of the Industrial Court

Throughout the proceedings, the Industrial Court emphasized fairness and industrial harmony. The room, filled with workers, union representatives, and company lawyers, radiated tension as arguments unfolded. The presiding chairman, an experienced arbitrator with a deep sense of duty, often paused the discussions to remind both parties, “This court exists to ensure justice, equity, and the balance of rights and responsibilities. Let us focus on resolution, not division.”

During a recess, Razak gathered with his colleagues in a nearby room. The air was heavy with apprehension. “Do you think they’ll listen to us?” Amin asked, his voice edged with doubt.

Razak took a deep breath. “We must believe they will. Al-Farabi said, *‘The virtuous society is one in which justice and mutual cooperation prevail.’* We’re here to remind them of what justice looks like—not just for us, but for everyone who comes after us.” Shahul Hamid, KPPPM’s Secretary-General, entered the room, carrying an air of calm authority. “Razak is right,” he said. “Justice isn’t just about winning; it’s about ensuring every voice is heard. As Al-Ghazali taught us, *‘Justice is the foundation of all virtues, for it ensures that each part fulfills its proper function.’* Your role, as workers, is to uphold the dignity of labor. My role, and this court’s role, is to ensure that dignity is recognized.”

The workers nodded, but the weight of uncertainty lingered. Halimah, who had been quietly listening, finally spoke. “Shahul, what if the court doesn’t rule in our favor? Will all this effort have been for nothing?”

Shahul smiled gently. “Halimah, remember what Al-Faruqi said: *‘Tawhid integrates knowledge, action, and the ultimate purpose of existence into a unified vision of justice and goodness.’* This struggle is part of a greater purpose. Even if the outcome isn’t what we hope for, the act of standing together for what is right is itself a victory.” The presiding chairman’s voice over the intercom called everyone back into the courtroom. As the workers filed in, the chairman began addressing both parties. “In ensuring industrial harmony,” he said, “we must reflect on the words of Al-Attas: *‘Justice is the condition in which each thing is in its proper place.’* Workers, your place is in a system that respects and values your contributions. Employers, your place is to ensure fairness and uphold the rights of those who sustain your enterprise.” The chairman’s words hung in the air, and even the company’s legal counsel shifted uncomfortably. Razak felt a surge of hope. “This isn’t just about us,” he whispered to Amin. “It’s about what Al-Farabi called *‘the good society,’* where every individual collaborates for the benefit of all.” We’re showing them what that looks like.”

As deliberations continued, the room was charged with a sense of purpose. The workers, buoyed by the wisdom of their leaders and scholars, stood firm, knowing that their fight was rooted in principles far greater than any court ruling. Whatever the outcome, they had already fulfilled a profound moral duty: to stand together for justice, guided by unity, faith, and the enduring belief in the power of collective action.

A Reflection with Iman and Tawhid

As the workers and union officials gathered in a modest room near the courthouse, the tension was palpable. The verdict from the Industrial Court was imminent, yet the hours felt like days. Amidst the anxiety, Shahul Hamid, the seasoned Secretary-General of KPPPM, decided to address the group with a reflection grounded in the Iman and Tawhid—a framework that emphasizes faith, unity, and reliance on Allah in all aspects of life.

Shahul stood up, gesturing for silence. “Brothers and sisters,” he began, his voice steady yet warm, “I know this wait is agonizing. But let us take this moment to reflect, not only on our struggle but on the greater purpose that binds us together.”

Razak, seated at the front, leaned forward, nodding. “You’re right, Shahul. This isn’t just about the factory. It’s about the principles we stand for.”

Shahul continued, “In Islamic teachings teaches us that Allah is the ultimate Provider and Sustainer. Whatever the outcome today, our reliance must remain on Him alone. This fight isn’t just about contracts or wages—it’s about our responsibility to uphold justice and dignity, as Allah commands.”

Amin, his nervous energy apparent, raised his hand. “But Shahul, what if the court rules against us? Have all our efforts been in vain?”

Shahul smiled gently. “Amin, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) faced greater trials and tribulations. Yet, he always upheld his trust in Allah, knowing that outcomes are part of His divine wisdom. Victory isn’t always in the result—it’s in the struggle itself, in standing firm for what is right.”

The room grew quiet as Shahul’s words sank in. A middle-aged worker named Halimah, who had rarely spoken during the meetings, broke the silence. “This reminds me of the verse from Surah Al-Baqarah,” she said softly. “‘And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed, it is difficult except for the humble.’ Perhaps this is our test—to remain patient and united.”

Shahul nodded, visibly moved. “Exactly, Halimah. We’ve done everything within our power. Now, it is time to surrender the matter to Allah, as an act of tawakal. Unity and perseverance are forms of worship when done for a just cause.”

Razak stood, addressing the room. “Shahul is right. Regardless of what happens, we’ve shown that we can stand together. We’ve reminded the company—and ourselves—that we are not disposable. That alone is a victory.”

Amin, visibly calmer, added, “And we’ve relied on each other, just as we’ve relied on Allah. That’s something no verdict can take away from us.”

The group sat in contemplative silence, their collective anxiety giving way to a sense of purpose and trust in Allah. Shahul led them in a quiet prayer, seeking strength, guidance, and a just resolution. The atmosphere shifted; what had been a room filled with fear now brimmed with quiet determination and faith.

As the clock ticked closer to the announcement of the court’s decision, the workers felt a renewed sense of unity, rooted not just in their shared struggle, but in their shared belief that their actions, guided by the Tawhidic paradigm, had already brought them closer to Allah and to one another.

This reflection served as a reminder that their struggle was not in vain. It was a testament to the enduring power of faith, justice, and solidarity—an unshakable foundation that no external decision could erode.

A Legacy of Unity

While the dispute was far from resolved, the workers' solidarity, guided by KPPPM, showcased the profound power of collective action. For Razak, Amin, and their colleagues, standing together was not just an act of defiance against the uncertainty they faced—it was a step toward reclaiming their dignity, a declaration that their voices mattered, and a commitment to shaping a better future. The gathering of workers under the KPPPM banner symbolized more than just a response to a labor crisis; it was a moral and spiritual journey inspired by principles of justice, unity, and shared purpose.

In a tense meeting at the KPPPM office, Razak addressed his fellow workers, his voice steady but filled with conviction. “Brothers and sisters,” he began, “we stand here today not because we want conflict, but because we demand what is rightfully ours—dignity, fairness, and clarity. This is not just about us; it’s about setting an example for future generations.”

Amin, seated near the back, raised his hand. “Razak, sometimes I feel like we’re up against a giant. How can we, just workers, hope to succeed?”

Shahul Hamid, KPPPM’s seasoned Secretary-General, interjected, his tone calm yet firm. “Amin, let me remind you of what Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi once said: *‘A just society is one in which individuals work together to fulfill their collective obligations to God and to each other.’* You are not just workers—you are contributors to a just and equitable society. Unity gives you strength, and justice gives you purpose.”

The room grew quiet as the workers reflected on Shahul’s words. Halimah, a senior worker who had been with the company for over two decades, spoke softly. “This reminds me of what Al-Ghazali taught: *‘Justice is the foundation of all virtues, for it ensures that each part fulfills its proper function.’* Isn’t that what we are asking for? To be treated fairly, with respect for the years we’ve given to this company?”

Razak nodded, his determination unwavering. “Exactly, Halimah. And as Al-Farabi said, *‘The good society is one whose members collaborate to achieve what is beneficial for all.’* This is our chance to show that we are not just fighting for ourselves, but for a workplace that values everyone.”

The conversation shifted as Shahul shared a reflection rooted in the teachings of SMN Al-Attas. “True justice,” he said, “is not just about receiving what is due. As Al-Attas put it, *‘Justice is the condition in which each thing is in its proper place.’* Your rightful place, as workers and as human beings, is one of dignity, where your contributions are recognized, and your rights are protected. That is what we are striving for.”

Amin, visibly inspired, added, “I suppose we are already winning in some ways. We’ve come together, we’ve made our voices heard, and we’ve shown that we are not afraid to stand for what is right.”

Shahul smiled. “Exactly, Amin. Remember what Al-Faruqi said: *‘Tawhid integrates knowledge, action, and the ultimate purpose of existence into a unified vision of*

justice and goodness. ' This struggle is part of that vision. Every step we take is an act of faith, a fulfillment of our duty to create a better, more just world.'

As the meeting concluded, the workers left with a renewed sense of purpose. Their solidarity had become more than a strategy—it was a moral imperative, deeply rooted in their shared values and beliefs. For KPPPM, this was yet another chapter in its mission to protect Malaysia's workforce, a testament that even in the face of uncertainty, unity is strength. And for the workers, it was a living demonstration that justice, when pursued collectively and with unwavering faith, was not just a distant ideal but an achievable reality.

Future Direction and Way Forward

The workers' struggle at Green Manufacturing Company echoes the timeless wisdom of Al-Farabi (1985), who emphasized that *"the aim of the virtuous city is to achieve happiness for all its citizens."* Their journey reflects a collective commitment to building an equitable workplace, where fairness and dignity serve as the foundation for progress. KPPPM's principled leadership embodies Al-Farabi (1985)'s ideal of a virtuous community, in which justice is not merely an abstract concept but an active force ensuring that every individual is treated with respect and value. This aligns with his belief that *"the good society is one whose members collaborate to achieve what is beneficial for all."* The workers' resilience and solidarity, therefore, represent a vital step toward transforming their workplace into a microcosm of this virtuous society.

Similarly, the teachings of Al-Ghazali resonate deeply in this narrative of collective strength and moral pursuit. Al-Ghazali (1991) reminded us that *"a just society is built on the foundation of mutual rights and responsibilities."* This principle underscores the necessity of fostering transparent communication and shared accountability between workers and employers. His insight that *"the virtue of justice is the foundation of all virtues, for it ensures that each part fulfills its proper function"* further illuminates the path forward. For the workers and KPPPM, justice is not merely about securing legal protections or fair wages but about cultivating a culture where the dignity of labor is honored, and all parties recognize their shared humanity. Through this lens, their struggle becomes not just a fight for their rights but a profound moral endeavor to create a more harmonious and virtuous society.

The road ahead, guided by the Tawhidic paradigm, finds profound resonance in the words of Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi (1992), who said, *"Tawhid integrates knowledge, action, and the ultimate purpose of existence into a unified vision of justice and goodness."* This principle serves as a moral compass for navigating labor relations, where reliance on Allah and shared responsibility become the cornerstones of every interaction and decision. The workers' unwavering solidarity is a practical embodiment of Al-Faruqi (1992)'s assertion that *"a just society is one in which individuals work together to fulfill their collective obligations to God and to each other."* Their collective strength reflects not just a fight for legal rights but a spiritual commitment to creating a harmonious and equitable workplace.

Sayyid Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1993) further enriches this perspective, emphasizing that *"justice is the condition in which each thing is in its proper place."* This echoes the workers' call for fairness and dignity, ensuring that their roles as employees are valued as integral to the broader system of societal harmony. Al-Attas

(1993) also reminds us that "*knowledge must lead to adab, the proper recognition of order and the right relations among individuals and communities.*" By embracing these faith-based principles, the workers' struggle transcends its immediate challenges, becoming a moral example for others. Their legacy inspires labor forces everywhere to seek justice not only as a legal entitlement but as a divine imperative, guided by unity, mutual respect, and the ultimate reliance on Allah's wisdom and provision.

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Discussion Questions

1. What lessons can we learn from this situation in the case about ensuring fairness and equity in workplace policies?
2. In what ways can faith in Allah inspire resilience and unity among Green Company workers facing uncertainty in the outcome of the case?
3. What role does Islamic brotherhood play in advocating for justice and protecting the dignity of labor?