Bone(s) of Contention

The past few years have seen various bodies within the LUMS community critique and pushback on decisions taken by the LUMS administration that were seen as unfair and/or harmful to them. While the LUMS community is seen as a cohesive whole from those looking in, there seem to exist selfish schisms where each branch only argues for and protects itself.

A recent example is that of an exponentially increasing batch size and the consequent strain on campus resources that was felt by (and resisted by) the students. This problem, that has threatened everything we hold dear (i.e. premium spots in the Pepsi Dining Centre and Green Olive), served as the precipitating factor in our coming together: we united, and in embodying the true spirit of social solidarity, protested such cosmic threats. This is evidenced by online forums and chatgroups overflowing with flowery polemics and curses hurled at our administration and council representatives. Although such issues deserved to be campaigned against, a pattern emerges where we take stand against policies that directly impact us, and largely pay only lip service to those that do not.

An example of us not speaking beyond what influences us is the issue of subcontracting. The outsourcing of janitorial labour entered the mainstream consciousness of the wider campus community in 2019, when janitorial staff conducted a sit-in to protest the non-payment of their dues. The LUMS administration absolved themselves of responsibility, hiding behind the fact that they were subcontracted workers, technically hired by a third party (specifically contracted for this).

Subcontracting is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the act of paying an outside person or organisation to do work that might normally be done within an organisation”. It is a contractual arrangement through which the University maintains its daily operations, benefitting from the labour of custodial staff, without actually having to hire these people as formal employees of LUMS. Instead, they are hired by MBM, the current contractor, who then supplies their labour to other organisations or firms. Hence, LUMS is not responsible for these workers, whereas MBM is. A grey area emerges in the space left over between the party that is outsourcing its labour supply and the firm that supplies it, where accountability flounders and workers can be left in a state of uncertainty and fear. Within LUMS, this means that these workers do not enjoy the same level of job security and associated benefits that other employees do, such as standardised wages and fixed working hours. Subcontracting serves to alienate workers from the organisation that in many cases they have worked at for years. If workers speak up or attempt to unionise against the unfair working conditions they face, they may face consequences such as being fired, or transferred to other jobsites by the contractor; there is no guarantee they can manage transport to this other organisation, and hence this is equivalent to de-facto firing.

The socioeconomic and caste strata that many of our janitorial staff hail from means that they are not privileged with easily available, alternative sources of work, that might afford them greater security and human dignity. Their situation is further compromised by the precarity that subcontracting fosters.

One of the leading voices in speaking up against this is the End Subcontracting Movement @LUMS, a joint initiative by students, staff, and faculty. This has been remarkably successful in recent years in channelling attention toward the plight of our janitorial staff. This collective has been at the forefront of the campaign to dissolve this illegal practice and to take on our subcontracted staff as equal, through demands to formalise the fact that they are members of our community and hence should be employees of the University. As delineated by the Movement, LUMS "outsources its responsibilities as an employer while benefitting from the 'invisible' labour that keeps the university running".

The Movement's demand letter to the then-Vice Chancellor Ali Cheema has recently been answered, 7 months after its submission. The outcome of the Inquiry Committee's deliberations state that the administration is taking immediate steps based on their recommendations, which includes the facilitating of worker's access to social security benefits, the regularisation of gardeners, stronger contractual accountability, among other positive steps. However, it was emphasised that further improvements are still being "pursued", and investigations will continue.

Some have critiqued the fact that the demands of the Movement, defined clearly in their Demand Letter as being the "abolition" of subcontracting, were not addressed directly by the administration's response. Although some positive steps were taken, the lack of immediate reply and hence transparency outweighs these steps. They felt instead that the decisions taken after this hiatus were akin to throwing us a few bones to chew on, while not addressing the issue directly. Others feel that these decisions are still steps in the right direction, despite the seemingly limited scope of the changes. For them, such changes are in fact attempts to find solutions to a delicate situation.

Another issue is that while people will actively join online conversations in support of such issues, they do not participate as enthusiastically in-person. In the subcontracting issue, the turnout for the several protests called by the Movement was only a fraction of those who had signed on their support of the Movement's objectives. Furthermore, there is a significant difference in volume of support online between the subcontracting issue and those that impact students directly, where most conversations focus on the lack of two-person hostel accommodations, or the declining quality of eateries on-campus.

The question of the priorities of our student body emerges, and at the same time, the division between the problems faced the different groups of the LUMS community are blurred. Issues at the administrative level impact all groups on campus, whether that is students, faculty, or staff; although the problems faced by each group feel disparate, administrative decisions that impact the LUMS community are guided by the same operating principles of profit maximisation and self-interest. Hence, seemingly distinct administrative decisions are undergirded by the same neoliberal logics, which strain existing structures and resources, such as hostel accommodation, parking, and in the case of our subcontracted janitorial staff, basic human rights. The heart of these various bones of contention remains the same, and hence, categories or groups become irrelevant.

LUMS is the students, staff, and faculty. Decisions taken that undermine any one of these parts inevitably weakens LUMS as whole, and hence, true solidarity should be demonstrated against administrative decisions that threaten any one part of this community.