

## Singapore Deportations Show Strains in Work Force

By Tanya Angerer - Dec 3, 2012 12:00 AM GMT+0800

Singapore's first labor protest since the 1980s led to the deportation of 29 Chinese bus drivers yesterday and the prosecution of five others, highlighting the difficulty balancing a work force reliant on foreign employees.

More than 170 bus drivers failed to report for duty on Nov. 26, while 88 halted work the next day, according to SMRT Corp. (MRT), Singapore's biggest subway operator and one of its two main bus companies. The striking workers, all from China, were unhappy with their salary increments and raised concerns about living conditions, SMRT said.

The deportations and strike show the perceived inequality among workers on an island reliant on foreign labor with limited union representation. In a city with 3.3 million citizens and 2 million foreigners, complaints about overseas workers depriving locals of jobs and driving up home prices helped opposition parties win record support in last year's general elections.

The incident indicates that Singapore's model "may not have kept up with its changing industrial landscape," said Eugene Tan, a Singapore Management University assistant law professor and a non-elected lawmaker who has limited voting rights. It raises the question of whether workers are adequately represented and how you maintain harmonious industrial relations when workers are segmented, he said yesterday.

Singapore completed the deportations between 12.15 a.m. and 4:35 p.m. local time yesterday, according to an e-mailed statement from the Ministry of Home Affairs late yesterday.

"They were cooperative and the process took place without incident," it said. "People's Republic of China Embassy officials, as well as SMRT staff, assisted in the repatriation exercise."

### 'Highly Concerned'

China previously said it was "highly concerned" about the arrest of its citizens.

The bus drivers facing charges could be imprisoned for as long as a year for taking part in an "illegal strike" that disrupted "Singapore's industrial harmony," according to statements posted to Singapore government websites. Four were arrested and charged, while the fifth was to be charged today.

Labor protests in Singapore are rare and unions have limited scope for industrial action as the government encourages consultative relations between employers and workers. In 2004, Ryan Goh, a pilot at Singapore Airlines Ltd. (SIA), the national carrier, was singled out by the government as the instigator in a disagreement on wages, and failed in his appeal to retain his Singapore permanent residency status, the Straits Times reported at the time.

### Malaysian Drivers



Among SMRT's drivers from China, only 10 percent are union members, according to a Straits Times report on Nov. 30, citing unidentified labor union officials. The newspaper said the strike, the first in the city since 1986, was to protest against what they saw as low wages compared to Malaysian drivers, and poor living conditions.

While the workers' actions were wrong, SMRT "could have done better in managing their labor grievances," Tan Chuan-Jin, acting minister for manpower, said in a speech received by e-mail on Dec. 1. "SMRT must take steps to ensure that a severe breakdown in labor relations like what we saw this week does not happen again."

The four drivers are charged with conspiring to instigate a strike by workers employed by SMRT Buses Ltd., according to charge sheets filed at the city's Subordinate Court. Police warnings will be issued to the remaining drivers with no other action taken by the government as "they showed remorse over their actions, or were even coerced into participating," according to the Ministry of Manpower.

## **Following Laws**

"Foreign nationals should abide by the laws of their host countries," Tan said.

"Singaporeans who work and live overseas are also expected to do so."

Strikes are illegal for workers in Singapore's essential services unless their employers are given two weeks' notice, according to the Manpower Ministry.

SMRT shares rose 1.5 percent last week, lagging behind the 2.7 percent gain in the Singapore benchmark Straits Times Index.

The 29 bus drivers will be paid before they leave the country, SMRT said on Dec. 1, along with pro-rated bonuses.

"Valuable lessons have been learnt from this incident which are being addressed by the management," SMRT said in an e-mailed statement on Dec. 1. "We need to improve our management, communication and engagement efforts to be more proactive, responsible and sensitive to the needs of our service leaders," it said, a term it uses for bus drivers.