

4 Chinese bus drivers in Singapore charged following rare protest

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SINGAPORE, Nov. 29 — Four Chinese bus drivers working with Singapore public transport operator SMRT were charged with "inciting an illegal strike" on Thursday, two days after a rare no-show over pay issues involving 171 Chinese bus drivers.

The four Chinese bus drivers were arrested between Wednesday and Thursday, the police said. Court documents showed that the drivers were all charged with instigating an illegal strike. He Junling, one of the drivers, was also charged with inciting a strike by allegedly posting a message on baidu.com titled "The insults and humiliation suffered by Singapore drivers."

The message complains about inequitable pay, poor living conditions and exploitation by SMRT, the public transport operator who employs the Chinese bus drivers. Some of the problems were also mentioned by other drivers during the strike later.

If found guilty of instigating an illegal strike, the drivers shall be liable to a fine not exceeding 2,000 Singapore dollars and an imprisonment of no more than 12 months.

The Chinese Embassy said it was very concerned about the arrest of the Chinese citizens and was arranging consular visits to meet the Chinese bus drivers.

It also urged all the relevant parties to "be unbiased and clam and not to make things worse."

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Manpower also issued a statement, saying that SMRT must address the labor and contractual grievances raised by its workers quickly. SMRT must ensure lines of communication are open and that it has proper grievances handling procedures in place, it said.

The 171 Chinese drivers did not report to work on Monday over a recent pay rise that saw their fellow workers from Malaysia getting a larger increase. Some 88 of them continued to stay away from work on Tuesday. All the workers went back to work after Singapore authorities and the Chinese Embassy stepped in to urge the workers return to their work.

Singapore's Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin described the incident as an "illegal strike." Some of the employees of SMRT, including 20 Chinese bus drivers, have been assisting the police in investigation into the incident.

Industrial disputes have been rare in Singapore over the past decades as authorities put in place measures that allows consultations involving both the workers, the employers and the government, while at the same time putting in place legal rules that make it virtually impossible to have a legal strike.

Under Singapore law, workers in essential services such as transport and public utilities must give their employer at least 14 days' advance notice of their intention to have a strike. The notice has to be signed by at least seven fellow workers involved in the strike or by at least seven union representatives of the workers. The notice then needs to be acknowledged and signed by the employer, after which, that notice needs to be put up in at least three conspicuous places where the workers are employed.

Singapore's Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck told local broadcaster Channel NewsAsia that the strong strand of the government against the workers, who were mostly not represented by an labor union, will give companies and investors here and potential investors the assurance about the country's stable labor relations.

However, some of the observers said that the incident also raised questions as to how Singapore manages its industrial relations. A blogger said that it may be a bit too stretched when there were no strikes over the past decades.

Eugene Tan, an assistant professor with the Singapore Management University and a nominated member of parliament, said the incident actually reflects a failure in its industrial relations.

"The issue has been brewing for a while and obviously it would seem that the workers didn't have sufficient channel for their grievances to be addressed and they have taken the rather drastic action of staging an illegal strike. In a way the illegal strike has worked. It has brought their grievances out publicly," he said. "Ultimately, even if this strike is now over, it wouldn't do good for SMRT if the drivers are unhappy."