

Episode casts spotlight on vital issues, say observers

By DERRICK HO

WHILE the Government has sent a strong signal that illegal strikes will not be tolerated in Singapore, the recent saga involving bus drivers from China has also thrown up several lessons that companies and the Government can learn from, said MPs and observers.

Among them, better communication channels to handle grievances, as well as more education for foreign workers on employment laws here.

"I think this sends a clear sig-

nal to the foreign workforce community about respecting how labour laws work in Singapore," said Mr Zaqy Mohamad, chairman of the Communications and Information Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC), of the criminal charges pinned on four drivers who allegedly instigated a work stoppage last Monday and Tuesday. A fifth will be charged today. Another 29 were repatriated yesterday for their involvement in the strike, a result of unhappiness over their pay and living conditions.

Most Singaporeans The Straits Times spoke to felt that the measures taken by the authorities were not overly harsh.

"I think the Government is doing the right thing, otherwise, more people will follow suit and there will be more strikes," said Mr Tony Ee, 57, who is unemployed.

But others also wondered who should do the job of educating the foreign workers about the dos and don'ts.

Said researcher Benjamin Li, 29: "Is the onus on the company

or the Government to make clear the laws, especially in view of more foreign workers coming into Singapore?"

Some felt the episode was a chance for companies to reflect on how they engage workers.

"There is a need to make sure that the communication channels are clear and two-way, so that all staff on every level have the chance to give feedback," said Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Ang Hin Kee, who is on the Transport GPC.

The episode has also cast the spotlight on several other issues,

including Singapore's reliance on foreign labour and whether these workers, especially those providing essential services, should be unionised. Only 12 per cent of the 1.16 million foreign workers here are unionised.

Law professor and political commentator Eugene Tan also questioned if SMRT should be let off the hook so lightly. "What sort of consequences will SMRT face? For a company that has allowed grievances to fester, it is getting away pretty lightly."

The Nominated MP plans to

bring up a couple of other issues – including how the 29 workers were temporarily housed in a prison facility despite not being charged with any offence – when Parliament next sits.

One issue employers will need to pay attention to from now on will be whether they should still give out bonuses or increments based on nationalities, rather than performance, said Mr Zaqy.

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