

## Re-examining our attitudes towards foreign workers

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By Aaron Low  
aaronl@sph.com.sg



Foreign workers playing cricket at Farrer Park. Source: TNP

Singapore's first strike in 26 years ended almost as soon as it began, lasting all of two days.

Some 171 bus drivers from China refused to go to work on Monday in protest against what they saw as low wages compared to Malaysian drivers', and poor living conditions. On Tuesday, 88 did not turn up.

On Wednesday, all the drivers returned to work.

But by then, the Government had decided that the industrial action constituted an "illegal strike" and had called in the police to investigate.

On Thursday, four Chinese SMRT bus drivers were charged for inciting an illegal strike.

The strike maybe over but the case on the role that foreign workers play in Singapore is far from closed.

More than ever, the incident raises many worrying questions that call for a fundamental review of some of the assumptions Singapore has about foreign workers.

For one, it clearly shows that Singapore is too reliant on foreign workers for many parts of its economy, social and public services.

Nominated MP and Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan notes that the incident has magnified the risks associated with a heavy dependence on foreign manpower.

“Can we always rely on foreign manpower to do the jobs we ourselves don’t want to do? What if political frictions occur between Singapore and say Malaysia or Indonesia?” he says.

“We have big research projects into energy security, food security but do we think about manpower security?”

The Government has made it clear that it wants to reduce the reliance on foreign workers for many of our companies.

It has said that foreigners should not make up more than a third of the workforce.

This level is reasonable because we will always need extra hands to make hotel beds, serve food and wash the tables - low paying jobs that many Singaporeans do not wish to do.

But whether we cap the level or not, the simple fact is that foreigners are already deeply embedded in many of our key sectors.

Public transport is one example. Even if foreigners don’t make up the majority of all bus drivers, they form a significant enough percentage of about 40 per cent of bus drivers.

Take the 171 bus driver who went on strike on Monday, for instance. Some 10 per cent of bus routes were affected by their actions.

Likewise, in healthcare and hospitals, about 26 per cent of all healthcare workers are foreign. And this is expected to grow to about 30.8 per cent by 2030.

Mr Tan says that most of the foreigners are probably here to make money and not likely to want to “cause trouble”.

Still, the reliance on foreigners is still worrying simply because we cannot always assume that Singapore will be able to attract workers here.

Employment agencies and companies have noted that its increasingly difficult to hire workers from fast growing countries.

China workers, for instance, are demanding more in salaries as their home economy expands at a rapid pace.

Malaysians themselves are facing a manpower crunch in several sectors of the economy, including manufacturing and services.

Where does this leave Singapore?

Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Hri Kumar puts it bluntly: “Some are writing about this as if we have real options - that we can simply stop importing drivers and nurses and there will be a supply of Singaporeans ready to take their places to drive the buses and work in hospitals etc.”

“There are some sectors where we will be continue to depend on foreign labour because there are insufficient Singaporeans or PRs who want those jobs. I think there needs to be a dose of realism.”

Singapore should continue to chase productivity in a bid to reduce over-reliance on foreigners.

But there is likely to be a limit on how much we can depend on ourselves and technology to enable the smooth running of the economy.

Perhaps what is needed is changing our attitudes to foreigners earning their keep here.

For far too long, many employers and regular treat foreign workers as second class, and merely as a source of “cheap labour”.

I am not saying that all foreigners should be paid the same as Singaporeans – who have to shoulder higher costs of living here – but surely employers should check themselves and see if they are paying a decent wage for dignified work.

In the case of SMRT, the Chinese workers’ grievances were clearly genuine.

The Manpower Ministry noted that there was a bedbug problem in some rooms of the SMRT dormitory for drivers.

It also said that general housekeeping conditions of the drivers’ rooms were below par compared to other rooms in the dormitories.

Is this really the way Singapore, as a first world country, wants to treat people who come here to work and support our economy?

As for regular Singaporeans, I often hear horrible stories about how local families treat foreign domestic workers, not allowing them to sit at the same table for dinner, or restricting their rest hours to a minimum.

Hopefully the strike will spur a deep re-examination of the role of foreigners and foreign workers in our economy and society.