

**102 China SMRT drivers stage 14-hour stand-off**

**LABOUR MP ASKS:**

# Why take matters into own hands?

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WHEN 102 SMRT drivers refused to board the bus which was to take them to work, they got labour experts here asking: Just how reliant are public services here on foreign labour?

And what would the impact be if a wage dispute here results in a long-drawn disruptive event?

Yesterday's action by the drivers - SMRT refers to them as Service Leaders - did affect a number of bus services but SMRT did not provide specific details.

The drivers claimed they got less in wages and overtime compared to their Malaysian counterparts.

After a 14-hour stand-off, which ended at 6pm yesterday, SMRT said the drivers will be back to work today.

An SMRT spokesman said: "This morning, 102 of our Service Leaders (SLs) for our buses who were recruited from China (PRC) did not show up for work. (See report at right.)

"As a result of their absence, a number of our bus services were affected. We apologise to commuters and the public who were inconvenienced by the affected bus services."

Of SMRT's 2,000 SLs, 22 per cent are Chinese nationals, 22 Malaysians and the rest Singaporeans or permanent residents, said the spokesman.

SBS Transit has some 5,300 bus captains, of which 60 per cent are Singaporeans or permanent residents, 29 per cent Malaysians and the remaining 11 per cent are from China.

The Straits Times reported that in the health-care sector, 13,000 out of 50,000 health-care workers in Singapore last year were foreigners.

**Numbers set to rise**

This number is set to rise to 28,000 among 91,000 health-care workers by 2030, according to an occasional paper released by the National Population and Talent Division on Nov 12.

It is clear - Singapore is reliant on foreign manpower, commentators told The New Paper.

"We rely on foreign manpower to meet our economic needs and keep the cost of living manageable but this presents risks: If something happens in their homeland and they go back en masse, our source dries up," said Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan.

The other risk is the potential for industrial action as these foreign workers are not used to Singapore's norm of consensus, Prof Tan said.

Malaysians, on the other hand, are familiar with the way things are done in Singapore. "They've been in the Singapore workforce for four decades and their cultural milieu is similar to Singapore," Prof Tan said.

Agreeing, the chairman of Migrant Workers Centre (MWC) and MP for Ang Mo Kio GRC Yeo Guat Kwang said the drivers could have approached the Ministry of Manpower's Foreign Workers unit.

They could have also approached MWC to address



PICTURE: SHIN MIN DAILY NEWS

**NO GO:** 102 bus drivers from China staged a boycott, refusing to work as they demanded for equal pay with their Malaysian colleagues.

*"We hope matters can be resolved as soon as possible so as to minimise impact on commuters and other SMRT workers who have to put in extra hours to cover the duties of those who do not show up for work."*

- An NWTU spokesman

their grievances. Instead, they took matters into their own hands, said Mr Yeo.

And for 14 hours, the drivers wouldn't budge, refusing even to speak to SMRT representatives initially.

That changed only after police turned up.

SMRT expressed "regret" that the SLs chose to display their unhappiness about their salaries in such a manner when its "lines of communication with them (were) always open", a spokesman said, adding that SMRT had recently increased the salaries of its SLs who joined the company before July.

Mr Zainal Sapari, NTUC director of the Unit for Contract and Casual Workers (UCCW), criticised the workers for what they did. He said there's a proper



**DEMANDS:** The service leaders from China declined to give their names, but said the decision not to go to work was decided as a group. About 200 bus drivers from China staged a boycott, refusing to work as they demanded for equal pay with their Malaysian colleagues.

TNP PICTURE: BENJAMIN SEETOR

## They missed the bus

TWO buses turned up at the Woodlands Dormitory at Woodlands Sector 1 yesterday before 4am to pick up bus drivers on the morning shift.

However, a number of drivers from China refused to board the bus, reported Shin Min Daily News.

They then tried persuading their colleagues not to go to work.

By about 8am, more than 100 drivers had gathered at the ground floor of the dormitory. Clad in their red SMRT uniforms, they sat at the canteen, Phan Nee Food Centre, for breakfast.

A driver, who wanted to be known only as Mr He, told Shin Min the Chinese drivers were unhappy their pay was lower than that of their Malaysian counterparts.

The drivers also claimed they were not allowed to secure overtime shift like other drivers.

At 9.30am, SMRT sent a human resource manager and an officer from the Woodlands bus interchange to the guardhouse at the dormitory. They wanted to negotiate with a representative of the Chinese bus drivers.

But the drivers refused to send a representative, saying they were acting as a group.

At noon, three buses arrived to pick up the drivers to get them to an SMRT facility for negotiations, but they again refused to board the buses.

As talks continued, police riot buses turned up and the drivers became worried they would be arrested, reported Shin Min.

They then returned to the dormitory.

At 4pm, they finally relented and met SMRT management and began negotiations in the dormitory.

An SMRT spokesman said talks ended at about 6pm yesterday.

The drivers will be back at work today.

procedure to adhere to.

The workers, he said, had acted without the knowledge of NTUW.

But the NTUW, or National Transport Workers' Union, said they do not have the legal mandate to represent the drivers from China who are not union members.

Was it a strike?

Prof Tan said that, to the layman, the bus drivers' action was a strike, but Mr Yeo directed TNP to local laws which defined a strike as a "cessation of work or persons employed in essential services" such as water, gas and electricity services.

The Straits Times reported that public transport workers are employees in essential services and would have to give notice of any industrial action, because the public at large could be affected.

The last strike took place on Jan 2, 1986, when 61 workers from US oilfield equipment company Hydril reported for work at their Gul Circle factory but then walked out and picketed outside the factory.

Police made no arrests yesterday. A spokesman said they got a call requesting assistance at 10am.

When they got to the Woodlands dormitory, they learnt it was a wage dispute between a group of foreign workers and their employer.

NWTU said it was prepared to help in the discussions, if the two parties welcome the involvement of the union.

The spokesman said: "We hope matters can be resolved as soon as possible so as to minimise impact on commuters and other SMRT workers who have to put in extra hours to cover the duties of those who do not show up for work."

If mediation talks fail, the bus drivers can turn to arbitration. On average, about five cases were referred to the Industrial Arbitration Court each year.

The case can also be heard in court and if the dispute is serious enough to affect the economy as a whole, then the Manpower Minister himself can step in and order both parties to go for compulsory arbitration.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharuddin hopes more Singaporeans will realise that the country has to be more self-reliant.

A "natural consequence" of such a move is that wages will go up.

The alternative is that Singaporeans must increase their productivity as much as possible, he said.

-Additional reporting by Kerri Heng and Yuen Mun