

Pay all drivers fairly, say commuters

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By Neo Chai Chin

SINGAPORE - Commuters questioned public transport provider SMRT's handling of the dispute with the protesting bus drivers from China, with most amenable to pay increases for the drivers to a level on par with their Malaysian counterparts.

Some had never encountered a labour strike before and said they felt "unnerved" by the drivers' actions. "It's well-entrenched in all of us that you do not go on strike. It puts commuters in a precarious situation where they are held hostage to the drivers' actions," said civil servant Koh Weiming, 30, speaking a day after the strike on Monday.

But he felt SMRT was the most accountable party, saying the drivers' actions "speaks volumes of the way SMRT handled negotiations with them".

"Whether for foreign or local staff, there should be a proper way to handle grievances," he said.

The unhappiness reportedly arose over unequal pay raises, with the Chinese nationals receiving three increments totalling S\$75, compared to a total of S\$275 for the Malaysians.

Part-time receptionist Chua Lay Kwan, 46, said that the salary grouses of the drivers' warranted a review by SMRT, but felt the drivers who refused to work should be penalised for their actions to deter future occurrences.

Photographer Irvin Tan, 30, was supportive of a pay raise for the Chinese drivers. "In any situation to do with wages, fairness has to prevail," he said, adding that the drivers' welfare should also include reasonable work hours, career opportunities and their happiness at work.

But most commuters felt that higher wages should not translate into higher fares, citing public transport as a public good and the profitable status of SMRT.

Executive Ms Wong, 23, who declined to give her full name, said she experienced some inconvenience yesterday as services 960 and 190 - which she takes daily to work in City Hall from the Choa Chu Kang area - arrived at lower frequencies.

Some buses were too full to board, and she gave up after 20 minutes, taking another bus to the train station instead. She hoped for the dispute to be solved as quickly as possible, but said SMRT's management would have its reasons for not offering the same pay to Chinese drivers as their Malaysian drivers.

Labour experts said various reasons could account for pay differences between different groups of workers - recruitment costs, workers' qualifications and experience, and the level of supply, just to name a few.

"In Singapore, for example, we are used to different pay for domestic helpers of different nationalities which may be attributed to demand and supply differences," said labour economist Hui Weng Tat of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

There may be a need to review work conditions and salaries of bus drivers, taking into account their responsibilities in promoting road safety and ensuring smooth functioning of the public transport system, and of their pay relative to other occupations, said Associate Professor Hui, who noted that Singapore bus drivers rank lowest among developed countries in terms of pay.

There is also a need for employers of a diverse workforce to be sensitive to cultural differences, said Singapore Management University's Professor of Strategic Management (Practice) Pang Eng Fong. "If you're going to be managing a workforce that is increasingly diverse - not only in terms of gender and age but also nationalities - you've got to be a lot more sensitive. Differences between groups are going to be sharper and can (result in) resentment if not properly managed," he said.

Agreeing, Member of Parliament Zainal Sapari said: "At the end of the day, if a company is over-reliant on a particular group of workers from a particular country, they must be aware of the cultural differences and labour relations. The PRC workers may not be aware that they what they are doing may be illegal. If a company is over-reliant, they need to manage the risk of it."