



SMRT bus driver He Jun Ling, who went on strike on both days, tells his side of the story to reporters outside the Woodlands dormitory. PHOTO: OOI BOON KEONG

Strike not the way to air grievances, say commuters

NEO CHAI CHIN AND
 SUMITA SREEDHARAN
 chaichin@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – Commuters’ reactions to the strike by SMRT bus drivers ranged from feeling “unnerved” to sympathetic, with many also taking the transport operator to task for what they viewed as less than stellar handling of negotiations with them.

For many of those interviewed yesterday, industrial action of the sort carried out by the drivers from China was a new experience, and several said they felt “unnerved” that a strike had been staged in Singapore.

“It’s well-entrenched in all of us that you do not go on strike. It puts commuters in a precarious situation of being held hostage to the drivers’ actions,” said civil servant Koh Weiming, 30.

Despite this, however, Mr Koh echoed a view held by many others that SMRT had a lot to account for, saying the drivers’ actions “speaks volumes of the way it handled negotiations with them”.

“Whether for foreign or local staff, there should be a proper way to handle grievances,” he said. The drivers’ unhappiness reportedly arose over what they viewed as unequal pay raises: The Chinese nationals received 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.

Those who said salaries should go up had a caveat, however — that higher wages should not translate into higher fares. They cited public transport as a public good and the profitable status of SMRT.

Labour experts said various reasons could account for pay differences between different groups of workers — including recruitment costs, workers’ qualifications and experience, and the level of supply.

“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, he added, noting 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. “Differences between groups are going to be sharper and can (result in) resentment if not properly managed,” he said.

Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC Zainal Sapari agreed and said: “The PRC workers may not be aware that they what they are doing may be illegal. If a company is over-reliant (on a particular nationality), it needs to manage the risk.”