

Singapore deportations show strains over foreign work force

Last Updated: Sunday, December 02, 2012 03:30:00



A police van reverses out of the premises of a dormitory as negotiations with striking bus drivers continue within the building in Singapore in this file photo taken November 26, 2012. REUTERS

Singapore's first labor protest since the 1980s has resulted in the deportation of 29 bus drivers and the prosecution of five others and highlights the difficulty balancing a work force reliant on foreign employees.

More than 170 bus drivers failed to report for duty on Nov. 26, while 88 halted work the next day, according to SMRT, Singapore's biggest subway operator and one of its two main bus companies. The striking workers, who are from China, were unhappy with their salary increments and raised concerns about their living conditions, SMRT said.

Singapore will start deportations from today, according to a release from the Chinese embassy in Singapore yesterday. China earlier said it was "highly concerned" about the arrest of its citizens.

The deportations and strike highlight the perceived inequality among workers on an island reliant on foreign labor with limited union representation. In a city with 3.3 million citizens and 2 million foreigners, complaints about overseas workers depriving locals of jobs and driving up home prices helped opposition parties win record support in last year's general elections.

The incident indicates that Singapore's model "may not have kept up with its changing industrial landscape," said Eugene Tan, a Singapore Management University assistant law professor and a non-elected lawmaker who has limited voting rights. It raises the question of whether workers are adequately represented and how you maintain harmonious industrial relations when workers are segmented, he said.

Illegal strike

The bus drivers facing charges could be imprisoned for as long as a year for taking part in an “illegal strike” that disrupted “Singapore’s industrial harmony,” the Singapore government said in statements on its websites yesterday. Four were arrested and charged, while the fifth will be charged tomorrow.

Recent wage disputes between employers and workers in the city state have involved pilots from Singapore Airlines Ltd.

Ryan Goh, a pilot at the national carrier, was singled out by the government as the instigator in a disagreement in 2004, and failed in his appeal to retain his Singapore permanent residency status, the Straits Times reported in March 2004.

Labor protests in Singapore are rare and unions have limited scope for industrial action as the government encourages consultative relations between employers and employees. Only 10 percent of SMRT’s China-born drivers are union members, according to a Straits Times report on Nov. 30 citing unidentified labor union officials.

Done better

While the workers’ actions were wrong, SMRT “could have done better in managing their labor grievances,” Tan Chuan-Jin, acting minister for manpower, said yesterday. “SMRT must take steps to ensure that a severe breakdown in labor relations like what we saw this week does not happen again.”

The four drivers are charged with conspiring to instigate a strike by workers employed by SMRT Buses Ltd., according to charge sheets filed at the city’s Subordinate Court.

Police warnings will be issued to the remaining drivers with no other action taken by the government as “they showed remorse over their actions, or were even coerced into participating,” according to the Ministry of Manpower.

Strikes are illegal for workers in Singapore’s essential services unless their employers are given two weeks’ notice, according to the Manpower Ministry.

“Foreign nationals should abide by the laws of their host countries,” Tan said yesterday. “Singaporeans who work and live overseas are also expected to do so.”

Due to the deportation, SMRT bus services are expected to run at 95 percent of normal levels, according to the Ministry of State for Finance and Transport.

“There are open channels of communications with all our service leaders, such as regular townhall sessions and staff dialogues,” Desmond Kuek, chief executive of SMRT said on Nov. 30. “It is unfortunate that this incident has happened. It shows that more needs to be done by management to proactively manage and engage our service leaders.” SMRT calls its bus drivers service leaders.