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Headline: Singapore to deport 29 Chinese bus drivers, prosecute five involved in rare strike

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SINGAPORE, Dec. 1 (Xinhua) -- A total of 29 Chinese bus drivers will be deported from Singapore after their work permits were revoked following a rare no-show or strike, Singapore's Ministry of Manpower said on Saturday.

A fifth driver will be charged in court on Monday for his role in the no-show. Four others had been arrested and charged with instigating and inciting an illegal strike on Thursday.

Each of the five drivers faces a charge of instigating an illegal strike, while He Junling, one of the drivers, faces an additional charge of inciting an illegal strike with online message he posted. If convicted, the drivers will face a fine of up to 2,000 Singapore dollars (1,639 U.S. dollars), or maximum imprisonment of 12 months, or both on each charge.

The Ministry of Manpower said the police had substantially completed their investigation and that it did not expect any further arrests to be made "barring any new developments." The rest of the 171 Chinese drivers who reportedly participated in the no-show earlier this week will be issued warnings.

The drivers working with local public transport operator SMRT took medical leave on Monday in protest against inequitable pay rise and poor living conditions. 88 of them continued to stay away from work on Tuesday.

The Ministry of Manpower said the actions of the drivers " disrupted an essential service and Singapore's industrial harmony. "

"While the SMRT bus drivers may have had grievances, these should have been raised through the legal and proper means available," it said.

SMRT has insisted that the door of communication had remained open but the drivers said they had had no choice as their voices had not been heard.

A senior management of SMRT said she has heard of the grievances of the Chinese workers but had received no written complaint. The chief executive officer of the company was taking a leave overseas and showed up at the workers' dormitory for the first time on Friday, two days after the arrests were made.

The Chinese Embassy in Singapore said it was "very much concerned" about the arrests and had made consular visits to the arrested drivers.

The Chinese workers had complained of unequal pay rise as they received a pay rise of 75 Singapore dollars, while the company's Malaysian drivers received pay rises of 275 Singapore dollars, in addition to a difference in bonus.

He Junling, who posted a message on the Chinese website baidu.com, also complained that the company had been using a change from six work days to five to cut the pay for overtime work. Another driver was quoted as saying that the Chinese drivers could now earn only about 1,400 Singapore dollars, compared with 2,000 Singapore dollars earlier.

A photo provided by a reader to local Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao showed the company insensitively used the phrase "excluding Chinese service leaders (bus drivers)" in several places in a written notice.

The Ministry of Manpower has said that SMRT must address the grievances of the workers quickly.

The government-linked public transport operator provides 25 percent of the bus services in Singapore. It also operates most of the mass rapid transit systems, which has experienced several major disruptions over the past year or so.

Singapore has about 1 million foreign workers and employees working in the country. The construction and some of the services sectors have been heavily dependent on foreign cheap labor.

Industrial disputes have been rare in Singapore over the past decades as the authorities put in place measures that allow consultations involving the workers, the employers and the government, while at the same time putting in place legal rules that make it as difficult as it can be to have a legal strike.

Under Singapore law, workers in essential services such as transport and public utilities must give their employer at least 14 days' advance notice of their intention to have a strike. The notice has to be signed by at least seven fellow workers involved in the strike or by at least seven union representatives of the workers. The notice then needs to be acknowledged and signed by the employer, after which, that notice needs to be put up in at least three conspicuous places where the workers are employed.

Singapore's Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck told local broadcaster Channel NewsAsia that the strong action of the government against the workers, who were mostly not represented by a labor union, will give companies and investors here and potential investors the assurance about the country's stable labor-employer relations.

However, some of the observers said that the incident also raised questions as to how Singapore manages its industrial relations. A blogger said that it may be a bit too stretched when there were no strikes over the past decades.

Eugene Tan, an assistant professor with the Singapore Management University and a nominated member of parliament, said the incident actually reflects a failure in industrial relations.

"The issue has been brewing for a while and obviously it would seem that the workers didn't have sufficient channel for their grievances to be addressed and they have taken the rather drastic action of staging an illegal strike. In a way the illegal strike has worked. It has



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brought their grievances out publicly," he said. "Ultimately, even if this strike is now over, it wouldn't do good for SMRT if the drivers are unhappy."