

Firm stand against illegal strike an assurance to investors: Teo Ser Luck

By S Ramesh



Foreign workers walk out of their dormitory in Singapore on Nov 26, 2012. (AFP/ROSLAN RAHMAN)

SINGAPORE: The government's strong stand against the illegal strike staged by 171 SMRT bus drivers from China will give companies and investors here and potential investors the assurance about the country's stable labour relations.

Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck said this in an interview with Channel NewsAsia.

And political watchers question if the labour movement is doing enough to reach out to foreign workers to join the unions.

The SMRT bus drivers strike this week should not and must not happen, and it's a matter to be taken seriously.

And Mr Teo stressed that Singapore's tripartism between the government, employer and unions has a strong bearing among investors.

"When they have lack of confidence, you have less companies investing in Singapore and less jobs as well. So we have to take these things very seriously, then the whole ecosystem can function well," he said.

Observers add that the incident has also raised questions as to how Singapore manages its industrial relations in the light of the changing demographics of the workforce.

Assistant Professor Eugene Tan, Nominated MP, said: "When you look at the SMRT incident, it 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 brought their grievances out publicly.

"It raises very valid questions about whether SMRT could have done better in handling their

foreign-born drivers. It raises the question of whether the National Transport Workers' Union made the effort to try to reach out to these workers, never mind if they are not unionised because there is an interest in workers working in the transport sector.

"It also raises the question whether NTUC, as well as its member unions, should make the effort to reach out to foreign workers, many of whom are not unionised.

"Ultimately, even if this strike is now over, it wouldn't do good for SMRT if the drivers are unhappy. It would be reflected in the service quality, it will also affect SMRT's prospects in terms of hiring other service leaders. The repercussions on SMRT are significant, it goes right down to how SMRT manages and treats its employees."

There's also a need for SMRT to do more to address the concerns of the workers and closely examine its own processes.

Mr Teo said: "Put the actions in place, put the systems in place and ensure that we can prevent such things from happening again. Because once it happens, it can happen again, and we need to prevent it and have a full proof, very strong and stringent management control put in place and ensure relations will be solid and stable in future.

"It need not have to resort in a strike, it need not have to result in an illegal gathering of sorts to go against the management and leadership. There are always many cases where management is willing to listen to workers and employers. We can always get around the situation through mediation or extensive discussion and if all means have been tried you can always approach MOM to seek help."

As for hiring only locals for essential services like public transport, Mr Teo said this is not always possible for service businesses.

Mr Teo said: "Some of these jobs when I talk to the service businesses is that they would always like to offer it to Singaporeans first and most of the time when they try to do it and try to bring the salary up, the experience tells them that the job environment and the job nature may not be the most favoured by Singaporeans. So they find it difficult."

He said it's about keeping a balance between making sure there are job opportunities for Singaporeans and that jobs left unfilled do not impact companies' ability to function.

This is something that both the Trade and Industry and Manpower Ministries are constantly looking at.

Mr Teo added: "This is the part we need to keep a balance between making sure that Singaporeans will always have their job opportunities as well as making sure that no jobs are left unfilled to the extent that the companies could not function. This is the balance point where MOM, MTI are all working together to look at the different industry needs and making sure that our businesses can function."