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**Mr Hairol Salim**  
 A FORMER INTERN

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**Mr Seng Han Thong**  
 MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (ANG MO KIO GRC)

“Interns come in with fresh ideas and a lot of enthusiasm, and we respect that ... An internship is about taking responsibility, and growing as a person. Our interns do the same kind of work that our full-time staff do.”

**Mr Allan Lim**  
 ALPHA BIOFUELS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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**SINGAPORE**—Right from the start, there were no illusions about what kind of internship she was in for: On her very first day at a local events company, Janice Chia and her fellow interns were told by their boss they were “the lowest life form” in the office.

“(He said) if (we) had nothing important to say, then (we) should keep our mouths shut,” said Ms Chia, 23, now a university student in Australia.

Over the next five months of her internship — which was required as part of her curriculum — Ms Chia and the interns would find themselves sometimes working seven days a week and “never leaving before 8pm on weekdays”. And while the full-time staff rotated shifts during a four-day conference, interns worked all day from start to finish.

But Ms Chia kept her head down and did as she was told. “We will probably get marked down for insubordination or failure to complete the tasks assigned,” she said.

The treatment of interns — who are typically paid less than full-time or contract staff — and the recourse available to them, should things go awry, has been thrust into the spotlight, after a secretly-filmed video of an intern getting slapped and verbally abused by his supervisor went viral on the Internet, sparking debate and leading to an investigation by the Ministry of Manpower.

#### SEEKING OUT INTERNSHIPS ON THEIR OWN, AT THEIR OWN RISK

Internships are a part of the curriculum for many courses at polytechnics and universities, where students can apply to firms that have partnerships with their schools. But some also seek internships on their own to earn work experience over school holidays, or after graduation.

The latter group — which employers TODAY spoke to said is a growing group — is especially vulnerable, as they do not have the option of seeking help from schools, which can intervene and even arrange for students to be transferred to another employer if an internship goes sour.

Former interns told TODAY that while they are aware of avenues for recourse — such as complaining to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) — they would rather brave through their stint.

Said Mr Hairol Salim, 28: “My priorities were the experiences I could gain, and hoping that this internship could lead to something bigger, like being signed to my first full-time job post-graduation. It is a competitive internship market out there. Do I have options to be choosy?”

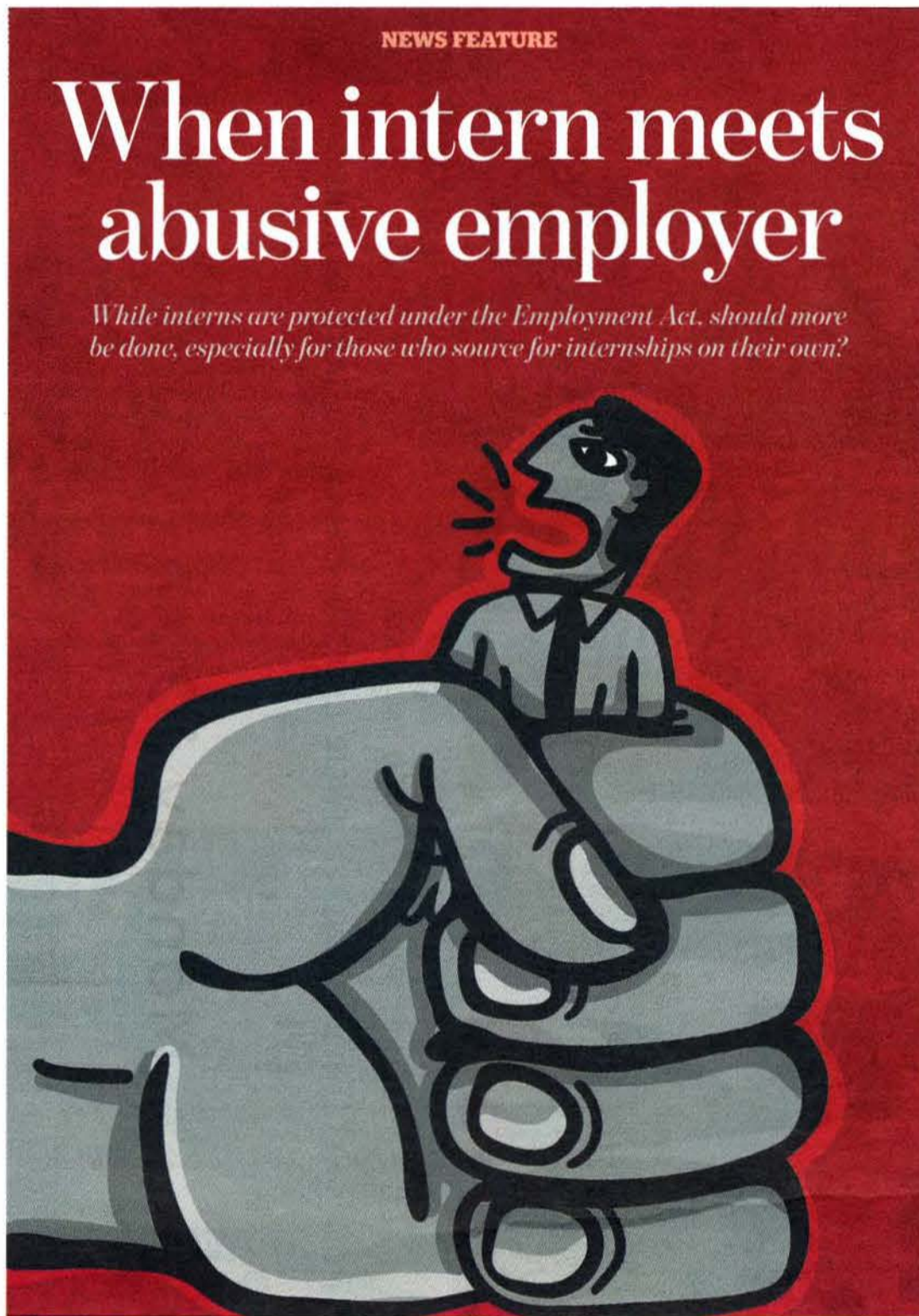


IMAGE: ISTOCKPHOTO

Interns are covered by the Employment Act which, among other stipulations, states that an employee should not be required to work more than 44 hours a week, or no more than 88 hours for two continuous weeks. Should the need to work overtime arise, employers must pay the employee for the extra hours put in.

Member of Parliament for Ang Mo Kio GRC, Mr Seng Han Thong, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Manpower, felt this segment of interns who source for their own internships represents a “grey area the MOM should look into”, adding that it should be a “two-prong approach” aimed at both interns and employers.

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“We must define clearly what an internship is. The ministry should also look into any loopholes in the internship system, where employers may abuse it to their own advantage. At the same time, I think the ministry should raise more awareness among those who self-secure their internships, about what they should be entitled to,” he said.

Even so, some interns perceive filing a complaint with the MOM as an onerous task. Mr Leo Boey, 24, an architectural assistant, encountered an unreasonable employer during an on-job training stint but did not consider turning to the ministry. “I believed that there was too much red tape to cut through,” he said.

Meanwhile, schools TODAY spoke to said they carefully evaluate the employers they work with for internship programmes. “We work closely with recruiting partners on the development of internship programmes to ensure that our students have an enriching learning experience,” said Ms Corrine Ong, Director of the National University of Singapore’s Career Centre.

Singapore Management University (SMU) Dean of Students Associate Professor Ong Siow Heng said: “SMU expects employers ... to set a high standard so that students can learn industry norms and expectations.” Students are given an Internship Guide with the contact numbers and email addresses of SMU’s career counselors, whom they can turn to for advice.

#### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS ON BOTH SIDES

Employers TODAY spoke to acknowledged that interns were integral to their operations. Energy company Alpha Biofuels keeps expectations of what interns would be doing clearly defined, by employing on a project basis.

Chief Executive Officer Allan Lim said interns “get started on exploratory projects”, where they run trials and experiments. “These interns come in with fresh ideas and a lot of enthusiasm, and we respect that. These projects are crafted for them to explore and learn while on the job,” he said.

Still, Mr Ong Teck Soon, Chief Executive Officer of local IT firm SEASAMI Singapore and Abecha, cautioned against mollycoddling interns, saying there should not be “double standards in the treatment of interns”. Nonetheless, “employers must also remember that an intern will be less experienced than an employee who has been in the company for a long time”, he added.

Mr Lim said interns must also possess the right attitude and willingness to learn, adding that he has employed interns who were only interested in clocking the required hours.

“An internship is about taking responsibility, and growing as a person. Our interns do the same kind of work that our full-time staff do,” he said.

Ms Wong Yeang Cherng, 23, who sought out her own internship with a government agency last year, advised interns to ask more questions about the nature of the work before accepting a job.

She found the work more like “schoolwork” and thought she would be learning more. “(I wished I) had a chance to really understand what it was before plunging in,” she said. “I hope interns don’t take up an internship blindly without knowing what they are in for, because it can be detrimental to the learning experience.”