Unions as Agency of Migrant Workers’ Discrimination and Social Exclusion

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Abstract

The Singapore government regulates ‘non-resident’ workers through categories of employment passes and repatriation in times of economic downturns. ‘Non-residents’ make up more than a third of Singapore’s workforce; the ‘resident’ two thirds are citizens and permanent residents. Until recently, Singapore’s ‘non-resident’ manual workers have been segregated from mainstream Singapore society, accommodated in dormitories and largely ignored by Singapore’s trade unions. Such workplace grievances as have arisen with employers have been mediated by the Ministry of Manpower or the ‘non-resident’s’ embassies. However, in late 2012 a group of bus drivers recruited from China, organised an illegal strike, something unknown in Singapore since 1977. Their action exposed to criticism by Singaporeans the government’s reliance on foreign workers, including professionals and entrepreneurs. After the strike, following some prosecutions and repatriations, some National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) affiliates began to recruit foreign workers into their memberships. This paper reviews the political and social construction of Singapore’s workforce, the re-emergence of industrial conflict, and the responses of the Singapore authorities to it. It reflects on the prospects for labour market regulation of partially incorporating foreign workers into its industrial relations system.

Introduction

Broader than ‘Asian’, the concept of the ‘Pacific Century’ was in vogue in the 1980s, although its focus was on the geo-political ‘Asia-Pacific’, within which, following the economic success of Japan, the dynamics of the growth of the then newly industrialised countries (NICs) of Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan were wondered at, for example by the BBC World Service’s series ‘People of the Pacific Century’ in 1983 (Leggett, 1984). In the concluding episode of that series, Singapore’s then Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, was cautious in speculating what the challenge to traditional values implicit in rapid industrialisation would bring. He said, ‘I’m not quite sure how it will all end up because traditions die hard when we’ve been embedded in civilisation for over three thousand years. But it will come about. It’s unsettling until a new balance is struck’ (quoted in Leggett, 1984: 220-221).
The regulation and development of Singapore’s labour market\(^2\) has been central to the nation’s economic development since full self-government in late 1959. The management of its labour market is one of the keys to Singapore’s economic success: ‘There can be few other places in the world where the social regulation of the labour market has been so consistently and explicitly a central component of national development strategy as it has been in Singapore’ (Coe and Kelly, 2000: 414).

From 1960 to the late 1970s, Singapore’s economic growth was associated with the supply of cheap, diligent, regulated and disciplined labour to multinational corporations (MNCs), mainly engaged in manufacturing. Labour discipline was underpinned by legislation that regulated industrial relations. To complement the inherited British colonial Trade Unions Act 1940, Trade Disputes Act, 1941 and Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act 1955 the Singapore government enacted a series of laws in anticipation of or in response to labour market development. The Industrial Relations Act 1960 introduced Australian-type compulsory judicial arbitration, the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 1968 and the Employment Act 1968 constrained the scope of collective bargaining, the National Wages Council Act 1973 provided the institutional means for an incomes policy, and the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 1982 redefined the objects of trade unions to exclude confrontation and include the promotion of productivity. The People’s Action Party’s (PAP’s) ‘protégée’ union federation, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), that was and is symbiotically related to the PAP, had already abandoned confrontational industrial relations in favour of business and service cooperatives at its iconic *Why Labour Must Go Modern* seminar in 1969 (National Trades Union Congress, 1969)\(^3\) and the merger in 1980 of the two main employers’ associations to form the Singapore National Employers’ Federation (SNEF) completed the framework tripartite structure of Singapore’s industrial relations.

From 1979, the government strategically induced a shift in Singapore’s economy towards high technology, high value-added production that required a parallel shift in the management and development of the labour market, which was beginning to include a significant foreign worker component. For Singaporean workers the shift meant upgrading their skills, both in technical proficiency and in the cultivation of ‘right attitudes’. The regulatory means for skills formation and character building were government agencies, the NTUC and the SNEF. Workforce development increasingly became a tripartite endeavour.

Beginning in the late 1990s, when the Ministry of Labour was symbolically renamed the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), the Singapore government led a push towards a knowledge-
driven economy with an emphasis on high skills and innovative talent (Leggett, 2007). Meanwhile, Singapore has augmented the local ‘resident’ (see Note 7) talent pool with innovative talent from overseas. At the other end of the talent spectrum unskilled labourers and domestic servants, largely excluded from mainstream Singapore by tightly regulated employment passes, comprise around a third of the total workforce. The dependence on foreign talent in particular and on foreign unskilled and semi-skilled workers more generally has led to disaffection from ‘resident’ Singaporeans and, in the case of bus drivers and construction workers from China, overt confrontation through a strike and protests with employers and authorities over pay and conditions, behaviour long ago abandoned by ‘resident’ Singaporeans and analysed below.

**Structural Features of Singapore’s Labour Market**

Singapore’s employed workforce increased from just under half a million in 1960, when unemployment was 13.5 per cent (Pang 1982: 10), to 3.3 million in the third quarter of 2012 (inclusive of more than 30 per cent ‘non-residents’), when total unemployment was 2.4 per cent. Unemployment percentages were higher for younger workers and for those with secondary, post-secondary (non-tertiary) and diploma and professional qualifications. Long term unemployment was highest among workers 40 and over years. Services employed 2.3 million, manufacturing over half a million, and construction less than half a million workers in 2012.

Singapore’s economy is dependent on ‘immigrant workers’, a generic term that includes ‘foreign workers’—semi-skilled or unskilled workers in manufacturing, construction, and domestic service – and ‘foreign talents’—globally sourced foreigners with professional qualifications or degrees. In the early years of Singapore’s industrialisation, Malaysia was the major source of foreign workers, but by the 1980s, with competing employment opportunities there, Malaysian construction workers were replaced by those from Thailand and Korea, while the Philippines supplied the majority of domestic servants (Wilkinson, Leggett, and Patarapanich, 1986). Today, the Indian sub-continent and increasingly China (quotas allowed

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1 In 2012, unskilled and semiskilled workers made up 75% of Singapore’s foreign workforce. Technicians made up 11%, and professional’s managers and executives 14%. Within the unskilled category, foreign domestic workers made up 16% of total foreign workers and 22% of the unskilled/semiskilled category. In July 2013 the overall dependency ratio ceilings for foreign to Singaporean unskilled, semi-skilled workers and technicians in companies in the services sector was reduced form 45% to 40%.(Straits Times, 25 February 2013 at http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/budget-2013-foreign-worker-levies-go-quotas-services-and-marine-sector )
are up to 25 per cent of foreign workers in manufacturing and 10 per cent in services) ii supply much of Singapore’s manual labour, and domestic servants now includes Burmese and Cambodians (Straits Times, 23 April 2013) 6. At the time of writing the Singapore government has projected a population of 5.3 million by 2030, mostly through an increase in foreign workers, to offset Singapore’s low birth rate (Reuters, 15 February 2013).

The occupational structure of foreign workers in Singapore is segmented according to a hierarchy of work passes that mainly differentiate levels of skill. In the semi- and unskilled categories, employment appears to be in an analytically distinct secondary labour market. MOM is charged with promoting progressive human resource management (HRM), and its Foreign Manpower Management Division is responsible for the general wellbeing of foreign workers, recording their complaints and attempting to resolve their grievances. Employment stability for foreign manual workers is not guaranteed, and they may be ‘released’ from their contracts prematurely and repatriated if their jobs are made redundant. While it is not illegal for them to do so, unless a collective agreement bans them, foreign workers are not encouraged to join its affiliates by the NTUC; neither do foreign workers seem inclined to want to join iii. Membership of Singapore’s trade unions, of which all but less than one per cent is composed of NTUC affiliates, is around 20 per cent of employed persons, a density sustained partly by tweaking membership and affiliation criteria (Leggett, 2009: 212-213). If a response to an article from the NTUC in the Singapore press (Straits Times, 24 May 2012)

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ii The 25 and 10 per cent are the quotas for Chinese foreign workers in these sectors. Foreign workers come on their own initiative, recruited by agents in their home countries.

iii The NTUC is an incorporated institution that does not seek membership from foreign workers. Everything is predicated on ‘residents’, even the labour force statistics. Singapore’s Constitution guarantees private sector workers the right to join a trade union. In practice however there are many restrictions. Union organizing is subject to the approval of the Registrar of Trade Unions who has the power to refuse or cancel registration. The rights to strike and to collective bargaining are also limited. Moreover, the NTUC adopts a so-called tripartite model of labour rights protection that does not consider the interest of the workers alone, but also those of the employers and the overall economic development, productivity, and the interest of the state. The rights of migrant workers to join a union are even further restricted. Foreigners are allowed to join a union; but they are not allowed to be trade union officers or be employed by a trade union.

There are separate procedural arrangements in the Ministry of Manpower for dealing with grievances by foreign workers. The co-chair of Singapore’s National Trade Union Congress (NTUC)-sponsored Migrant Workers Centre, Yeo Guat Kwang, admitted in an interview that if workers had signed an agreement to forfeit their rights [with the recruiting agency in the home country] before they came to Singapore, there was little the Singaporean trade unions or other authorities could do for them (China Labour Bulletin interview with NTUC official Yeo Guat Kwang, 19 May 2010, cited in Chan, 2011: 40). In addition foreign workers know that employers do not have to give a reason for dismissing a foreign worker, and when they are dismissed their work permit is revoked and they must return home. In these circumstances foreign workers will not draw their employers’ attention by seeking to join a trade union. Agreements are mainly enterprise agreements and once approved by the Industrial Arbitration Court (IAC) have the status of awards that cover employees in the enterprise, regardless of nationality.
is representative, then Singaporean workers are as apathetic, if not cynical, about the NTUC’s industrial impotence: a tweet in 2012 read ‘Usually you join unions for collective bargaining & rights protection [but] in Singapore you join the union for attractive supermarket discounts’ (Waging Non Violence, 8 June 2012)

Most employment in Singapore is in the corporate sector, in companies and businesses that include many large government-linked-companies (GLCs) that function as competitive business enterprises and form a substantial part of the corporate sector. In the public sector, in addition to state-run services, the existence of more than 60 statutory boards answerable to the relevant government ministries has helped keep the civil service trim.

Since the transition by the Singapore government in the late 1990s from labour management, with its emphasis on harmonious industrial relations, to manpower planning with its emphasis on ‘human resource management’ (Ministry of Manpower, 2000) and ‘human capital’, with its derivatives of ‘knowledge capital’, ‘imagination capital’, ‘emotional capital’, and ‘social capital’ (Ministry of Manpower, 2001), labour market flexibility has increasingly dominated the rhetoric of public policy. The keys to labour market flexibility in Singapore are flexible wages and employee adaptability to changing economic conditions. The direction for labour market flexibility is from the tripartite National Wages Council (NWC). The explicit ongoing mission of the NWC is to ensure that real wages are in line with productivity growth, not ahead of it. To this end, in 2008, it recommended that companies make greater use of variable payments to reward workers for their contribution to corporate performance, and to speed up adjustments to wage costs, it urged them to incrementally increase their monthly variable components and use them to differentiate the values of jobs (Ministry of Manpower 2008). In 2011, it recommended that companies make greater use of variable payments to reward workers for their contributions, instead of granting higher built-in wage increases. However, in 2012, the NWC recommended a ‘built-in wage increase’ to help low wage workers, but ‘to improve productivity’, it strongly encouraged companies ‘to adopt technology and innovation in their work processes’ and called on management ‘to spearhead the productivity drive within the company and build a culture supportive of innovation at the workplace’ (Ministry of Manpower 2012).

Workforce development in Singapore’s is almost exclusively for Singaporean ‘residents’, from whom any tendency to overt industrial conflict has largely been exorcised by two generations of social engineering. Therefore, it is not surprising that the return of the strike to Singapore after more than thirty years should have been conveyed by foreign workers, in
particular socially excluded Chinese workers who have not been inculcated with the values internalised or complied with by Singaporean ‘residents’ (Wilkinson and Leggett, 1985). Until then grievances reported by foreign workers had usually been conciliated by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), sometimes through discussions with the aggrieved foreign workers’ embassy.

The Singapore Bus Drivers’ Strike in 2012

Recently, the conditions of employment of foreign Chinese workers in Singapore have caught the attention of researchers (Chan 2011) and social activists (Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics 2010, 2011; and the international media (China Labour Bulletin, 2012). More recently, the strike by Chinese bus drivers in Singapore received both domestic and international media coverage (Straits Times, 2012; Wall Street Journal, 2012).

Dissatisfaction with their conditions, as compared with their Malaysian and Singaporean coworkers, came to a head in November 2012 when Chinese migrant bus drivers organised an illegal strike (Reuters, 1 December 2012)\(^{iv}\). There had not been an unlawful strike in Singapore since 1977 when a non-NTUC affiliated house union called a strike at the Metal Box Company. The Metal Box strike became unlawful when the union called for the dismissal of Metal Box’s personnel manager, thus breaching the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 1968 by raising as an issue a management prerogative sanctioned by the Act. As a result, the Metal Box Union lost the confidence of its members and was eventually dissolved and replaced by an NTUC affiliate (Deyo, 1981: 500). There were occasions of industrial conflict after 1977, most notably between the Singapore Airlines Pilots’ Association (SIAPA), another non-NTUC affiliate, and Singapore Airlines in 1980 when SIAPA organised a work-to-rule, seriously disrupting the airline’s flight schedules (Leggett, 1984b). A strike at an American MNC in 1985 was allowed by the then Minister of Labour, supposedly, according to one source (Asiaweek, 10 March 2000), to counter the observation that the legislation makes ‘a legal strike in Singapore is virtually impossible without the tacit consent of the government’ itself a reiteration published at a sensitive economic time in a business journal (Wilkinson and Leggett, 1985: 12) of an earlier claim (Pang, 1981: 486).

With the exception of the SIAPA work to rule in 1980 Singapore’s industrial relations since 1977 partly fit the ‘sophisticated paternalistic’ pattern (Fox, 1974, pages 297-313) whereby a

\(^{iv}\)Drivers on strike were all from mainland China. There was no reaction from other bus drivers, after all they were comparatively better off and, being Malaysians mostly, know to keep their opinions to themselves while in Singapore. The mainland Chinese did not have this understanding.
pluralist management (but in Singapore, the unitarist PAP government) and unions (in Singapore, the NTUC) jointly regulate the workforce, but are unaware of or are complacent about the grievances of the workers they regulate. Such a pattern is liable to experience an unanticipated seismic shift as frustrations build. However it has not been the frustrations of Singaporean workers that led to overt industrial action, but those of outsiders distanced by management, by the government, by the trade unions, and by Singaporean society, that is, foreign workers.

On Monday, 26 November 2012, about 171 Mainland Chinese bus workers employed as drivers by the Singapore Mass Rapid Transport (SMRT) went on strike to protest against what they alleged were SMRT’s discriminatory pay practices, the differentials in terms and conditions of employment between Chinese, Malaysian and Singaporean drivers. The next day, in spite of talks between the drivers and management, the strike continued.

On Wednesday, 28 November 2012, twenty drivers were questioned by the police, and the following day, Thursday 29 November, four of them were arrested, charged with offences under the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act that prohibits strikes in essential services and requires 14 days’ notice of industrial action in others, including transport, and the Penal Code, and were remanded in custody pending further investigation. The striking drivers then returned to work. On 1 December 2012 it was announced that a fifth driver would be charged. He pleaded guilty and was subsequently sentenced to six weeks jail. Twenty-nine others had their work permits revoked and were repatriated, and the rest who were involved were issued with warnings. The four drivers charged on 29 November were tried in February 2013 and sentenced to six and for one of them seven weeks’ jail before being repatriated to China. It was revealed in court in their defence that they had instigated the strike because they had no access to collective bargaining and they were unable to enjoy union representation: the National Transport Workers’ Union’s collective agreement with SMRT excluded employees on a ‘temporary’ or ‘contract’ basis.

The Chinese bus drivers were not the only foreign workers protesting in Singapore at this time. Two construction workers from China had perched themselves on top of two tower cranes to protest at owed wages, a common grievance of foreign workers in Singapore, usually settled by MOM, which in their case had previously told them to return to MOM with
documents to support their claim (Straits Times, 7 December 2012). They were eventually persuaded to climb down and were charged with criminal trespass.

**Analysis**

Foreign workers in Singapore in the semi and unskilled (work permit) categories, are employed in a distinct secondary labour market within which they experience sub-standard conditions, job insecurity, ambiguity in their employment relationship and exclusion from mainstream Singapore society. Especially if they are from China they are likely to be familiar with the manner in which Chinese workers have, in the absence of support from trade unions whose officials are often superannuated Communist Party hacks (Shen and Leggett, 2006).

**Sub-standard terms and conditions**

Foreign manual workers in Singapore have no recourse other than to MOM, or perhaps their embassies, to resolve their grievances. The expression of concern from the Chinese Embassy in Singapore for the Chinese arrested bus workers was little more than token (Straits Times 29 November 2012). The complaints of foreign workers in Singapore to MOM include overcrowded accommodation in illegal dormitories, poor quality food provided by illegal caterers, inadequate medical attention and late or non-payment of wages. An Institute of Policy Studies review (Yap and Wu n. d.) observed that foreign workers’ wages do not rise with those of Singapore workers, because adjustments and bonuses are not legally delineated, and that employers are not bound to give foreign workers any developmental training.

**Job Insecurity**

Employment security for foreign workers in Singapore is precarious as they may be terminated and repatriated if their jobs are made redundant. In effect foreign workers form a buffer against economic downturns and contribute to the flexibility of Singapore’s labour market by accommodating adverse economic conditions arising from external crises such as

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* The main NGO that reports the plight of foreign workers in Singapore is the China Labour Bulletin (cited above). In the past foreign journals that have offended the government have had their circulation cut. Liability for defamation extends from the owners and editors to the delivery agency. The line between what is permitted and what is not is blurred and journalists have strayed across it occasionally.

* The Employment Act gives workers the right to maternity leave, childcare leave and unpaid leave for infant care but the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) stipulates that foreign workers are not allowed to get pregnant or give birth in Singapore. The EFMA requires the work permit of a foreign worker who is certified medically unfit to be revoked. Foreign workers are excluded from Singapore’s compulsory (for Singaporeans) social welfare savings scheme, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), in spite of the fact that foreign workers in Singapore for more than 182 days are taxed at the same rate as ‘resident’ workers.
the global financial crisis (GFC). In 2008, as a result of the GFC, 2,450 workers in the production and transport operators, cleaners, and labourers category were released early from their contracts, as against 680 in 2007 and 360 in 2006. Overstaying is not impossible – nearly, 5,000 over stayers were apprehended in 2007 (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2008) – but the enforcement of repatriation is outsourced to private companies, which have sometimes detained and handcuffed employees before their deportation, and male illegal immigrants (and their harbourers) receive mandatory corporal punishment if apprehended.

Redundancy is not the only threat to foreign workers’ employment security in Singapore. In May this year a Malaysian working in Singapore who participated in protests there at the outcome of the Malaysian general election was arrested and had his work pass revoked, while others were issued with conditional warnings and their employers informed (Straits Times, 15 May 2013). Although Singaporean workers’ minor transgressions do not go unpunished, they are not deprived of their capacity to seek employment in Singapore. Where they are made redundant for economic reasons there is a network of institutional provisions – mostly tripartite – for their retraining and re-employment.

*Ambiguous employment relationships*

The Singapore government has always regarded its population as a major policy concern, in particular its growth, its ethnic and genetic composition, its age, its intellectual capital and its skills. From time to time, it has encouraged foreigners with desired qualities (in the 1980s from a Confucian background – i.e., not Malays, Thais or Filipinos) or skills to apply for permanent residency, but the unskilled foreign workers in Singapore for the most part are not regarded as suitable applicants. As we have seen, they are tightly regulated by the system of employment passes. The occupational structure of Singapore’s foreign workers is segmented according to a hierarchy of the work passes. They mainly differentiate between three levels of skill: professionals, managers, executives, and specialists; middle-level skilled manpower, such as technicians; and semi-skilled, unskilled, and domestic workers. It is not unusual to find foreign workers with professional and graduate qualifications from the less developed Asian countries working in Singapore as unskilled manual employees and as domestic servants.

*Exclusion from mainstream Singapore Society*

Singapore is a multi-ethnic society. In 2009, Singaporeans ‘residents’ comprised 13 per cent Malays, 75 per cent Chinese, 9 per cent Indians and 3 per cent other races, but 50 years of
‘nation building’ have placed Singaporean identity above ethnicity. A national ideology proclaims the ‘shared values’ to be: nation before community and society above self; family as the basic unit of society; community support and respect for the individual; consensus, not conflict; racial and religious harmony. (Government of Singapore, 1991).

Singaporean ‘residents’ are to a large extent spared the stress of the insecurity of casualization in a flexible labour market because, de facto, this is borne by foreign workers. In June 2009, for example, 87 per cent of resident employees were permanent. Resident Singaporeans also benefited from support in the labour market, as has been mentioned from tripartite institutions and from the NTUC, support denied foreign workers. The NTUC’s long-term commitment to employment creation has led it to set up agencies to facilitate entry and re-entry to the labour market. Its current efforts are mainly concerned with lifelong learning and employment flexibility. They include: ‘Encouraging Lifelong Learning’, a tripartite endeavour to enhance the employability of Singaporean workers; the ‘Skills Program for Upgrading and Resilience’, which supports the Workforce Development Agency’s scheme to upgrade training programs; ‘Skills Save’, for Singaporean workers to save for payment of courses from an approved list; ‘NTUC Learning Hub’, a booking and payment corporation for training courses; and ‘Job Recreation’, which provides employment and employability assistance to Singaporeans. Others’ efforts are tangential to the labour market and include compensating retrenched workers, assisting women in the labour market, facilitating the re-employment of older workers, enhancing the economic and social wellbeing of low-wage contract and casual workers (Leggett, 2011: 98).

Objectively, unskilled foreign workers in Singapore are segregated from mainstream Singapore society. However, their substantial presence, highly visible in the case of the foreign domestic helpers who free up Singaporean wives and mothers for the workforce, provoke the expression of unequivocal opinions in the social media and blogs. A recent provocation was the suggestion by a PAP Member of Parliament and former NTUC leader that the employers of foreign domestic helpers (‘maids’) should be required to give their maids one day off a week. The response was a flurry of blogs from employers berating their maids, but not all. One measured contribution in the English language press to the publicly expressed disaffection of Singaporeans with the government’s policy on the employment of foreign workers was more sympathetic. It read:
In these past few years, there has been an influx of foreigners in Singapore. Because of this, many see foreigners as competition for the limited number of jobs available here.

What most Singaporeans do not realise is that many of these foreigners are taking up jobs Singaporeans do not want, such as construction workers, domestic helpers and toilet cleaners.

For example, women from the Philippines, Myanmar and Indonesia who come here to work as domestic helpers do not snatch jobs from locals. Instead, they help take care of families - their pets, parents and children - and keep the houses clean and tidy.

But many domestic helpers are treated with disgust and contempt, and some are subject to abuse.

My family's helper has been working for us for almost 10 years. She takes very good care of us and in return, we treat her as part of the family. She gets regular days off and time off to visit her own family.

We should learn to appreciate foreign workers instead of looking down on them because they are contributing to Singapore too. (Straits Times, 11 May 2013)

Conclusions

Most analyses of Singapore’s employment relations understated the significance of the substantial and growing employment of foreigners, especially those who undertake the manual and domestic work largely eschewed by Singaporeans. Singapore’s dependence on foreign workers is a politically sensitive subject and until recently rarely openly discussed in Singaporean forums. However, it became an issue in the run up to the last general election in which the PAP government made some concessions to public opinion, by raising the threshold income for the employment of foreign talent. More recently, the government’s projection for the growth of Singapore’s population, mainly through immigration, sparked protest from Singaporeans within the constraints on public expression applied by the Singapore authorities.

Long accustomed to peaceful, if not entirely harmonious, industrial relations the occurrence of an unsanctioned strike by foreign workers in 2012, judging by the social media blogs and electronic correspondence columns in the local press, came as a surprise to most Singaporeans, including perhaps to the authorities. It would not have been the first time the
authorities had been caught out. The Singapore Airlines pilots work to rule in 1980 – many of the offending pilots were foreign nationals – was not anticipated by the then Ministry of Labour and ended the minister’s political career. For some Singaporeans the 2012 strike stimulated them to acknowledge the ineffectualness of the NTUC (which had publicly criticised the Ministry of Labour over the pilots’ action in 1980, and whose charismatic secretary-general was appointed by the prime minister to revamp personnel management at Singapore Airlines after the event) and its current nondescript officials. For others, who acknowledged the grievances of the striking bus drivers, the law had to be invoked and the instigators of an unlawful strike exemplarily punished.

The Chinese bus drivers’ strike and the exposure of Singaporean’s sentiments towards foreign workers and government projections have social, political and demographic implications for the direction of Singapore’s political economy. It is to be hoped that future research of that political economy includes in its studies of workforce development, labour markets and employment relations a recognition of the significance of Singapore’s dependence on foreign workers, especially those from Asia. Since the strike, following some prosecutions and repatriations, some NTUC affiliates began to recruit foreign workers into their memberships. Future will tell if we will observe further incorporation of foreign workers. Yet, ambiguity over the true motive of such a move persists, as emphasized by Yeo Guat Kwang (NTUC leadership):

> ‘When we look at the migrant workers’ issue, we are not looking at it from the perspective of human rights. We are looking at it on a need basis... Like it or not, we need to sustain and grow an economy that is able to generate an annual per capita [GDP] of US$35,000. At the end of the day, whatever factors would be able to help us to sustain the growth of the economy for the benefit of our countrymen, for the benefit of our country; we will definitely go for it’ (BBC, 2010).

Notes

1. Emulation of the Japanese employment system was de rigueur in Singapore in the early 1980s with *Japan as Number One* (Vogel, 1980) compulsory reading for senior public servants.
2. Regulation and development by the People’s Action Party (PAP) government that has won every election since 1959.

4. The last unlawful strike in Singapore before 2012 was in 1977, at the Metal Box Company, although Singapore Airline pilots organised a work-to-rule in 1980 (Leggett, 1984b). A strike at the Hydril Company in 1985 had the tacit consent of the Minister of Labour and was not unlawful (Asiaweek, 10 March 2000).

5. Unless otherwise cited, the labour force statistics for Singapore are from the Ministry of Manpower (2013).


7. The official nomenclature of ‘residents’ for Singaporean citizens and Permanent Residents evokes the sense of exclusion of ‘non-residents’ who in fact do reside in Singapore, as employment pass workers.

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