

On the treatment of workers in Singapore

29 July 1998

The letter printed below was passed on to the WSWs by a reader in Singapore. It details the treatment meted out to employees of Seagate Technology International, an American software company. The workers were fired and charged with producing fake medical certificates (MCs) purportedly issued by the Sultanah Aminah Hospital. The letter outlines the conditions that obliged the workers to resort to the false certificates. Those repressive conditions are obviously not confined to Seagate, because the hospital has reported that 2,008 medical certificates from 57 Singapore companies submitted for verification were all found to be fake.

June 26, 1998

Dear friends,

I received this through the grapevine. Not sure if this is true, but apparently, this is the story from the other side of the coin. A traumatic experience for Seagate workforce. Pass this news around.

The recent arrests of more than 97 workers over forged medical certificates (MC) have definitely caught the attention of both the public and the media. One of them, a friend of mine, underwent an operation to remove a cyst in her head at a private hospital and was given a four-day MC. Since the company does not recognize MCs from private hospitals, her son helped her get a government MC instead.

Another woman bought a fake MC because her child was sick and her emergency leave was not approved. The word 'leave' has always been a sensitive issue at Seagate--be it medical, annual, unpaid or emergency. As an ex-Seagate worker, I wish to relate some of my experiences there. On most occasions, we had to work on public holidays. We would be warned beforehand that those who did not turn up for work to 'support' the team would have their annual leave and overtime frozen for a month. Such absence would also be taken into consideration in the increment review. There was no exception, even on Labour Day. Another 'hell' day

was when operators who were also mothers applied for leave to register their children on the first day of school or kindergarten. They would be called up and questioned to the extreme before being granted the leave. As such, MCs are often seen as a 'bail-out'.

Forging an MC is wrong. But what angers me is that these workers were sacked immediately without even considering other options. Some of them have worked for more than 11 years and are first-time offenders like my friend who did undergo surgery and got a private hospital MC. The operators' nightmare did not end with mere firing.

The company management took upon themselves the role of 'supercops'. They had the girls board a factory bus parked inside the factory gate which was very unusual. They lied to these girls by saying that they were to be dropped off at the Causeway checkpoint. Instead, they were taken to the Ang Mo Kio police station. Some were handcuffed like hard-core criminals, and some were refused their right to make phone calls for the first 12 hours on arriving at the police station. Others who failed to post bail were held at the station for more than two days.

At home, there was chaos. On a normal day, night-shift workers who can't afford maids, would make a mad dash home as their children would be left alone sleeping in the house as their husbands have to go to work in the morning. Imagine how traumatic it must have been for these mothers to know that their children would be left alone by husbands who didn't know of their arrests? One woman's children, aged five and seven, were found alone in the house after more than six hours by the neighbours. I cannot understand how an American company like Seagate, being a model employer which talks so much about human and women's rights back in their homeland, can treat their workers in such a manner. Seagate could have resolved this matter internally, as mentioned by Mohd Khalid Nordin, MP for Johor Baru (*New Straits Times*, June

18). The company's silence only leads us to believe that it has used this as an opportunity to 'downsize' its work force, rather than pay retrenchment benefits. Finally, on behalf of these women and their families, I would like to thank Mohd Khalid Nordin for his advice and for not turning his back on them. As for the women who have decided to fight it out in court, I wish them the best of luck.

See Also:

Economic crisis fuels tensions in Malaysian government

[2 July 1998]



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