Striking bus drivers in Singapore face arrest and deportation

A correspondent
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On November 26, 171 bus drivers of SMRT, Singapore's second largest public transport operator, went on strike to fight for higher wages and better living conditions. The bus drivers are part of a contingent of 450 workers that SMRT had recruited from China on a two-year work permit contract.

Bus drivers in Singapore are one of the lowest paid sections of workers, with a base salary between 1075 and 1600 Singapore dollars (US$885-1,315) per month and a working week of 44 hours. With an almost 1 million-strong contingent, foreign workers represent almost one third of the Singaporean labour force. They keep the Singapore economy running, working in low-paid jobs in the service, construction and manufacturing industries.

With ever rising living costs, these workers are forced to work overtime to make ends meet, especially when they have to support their families back home in China.

Income inequality has increased tremendously over the last two decades, with Singapore's Gini coefficient ranging at the level of 0.473 in 2011. (The Gini scale ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing a society where everybody earns equal income and 1 standing for a society where one person earns all the income.)

The tax-free treatment of capital gains and other pro-market policies of the Singapore government have attracted numerous hedge funds to set up their headquarters on this island, creating a society with the world's highest concentration of millionaire households (approximately 15.5 percent of all households).

The economic growth in Singapore has been fuelled by cheap labour brought in from China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. Workers are forced to accept timed job contracts offering just a little more income than they could earn in their home country. They are usually locked away in dormitories, separated from the local population. Any contact with local Singaporeans is discouraged.

There is an established system of divide and conquer, with foreign workers receiving lower pay for the same work compared to Singaporean workers. Competition with foreign workers is used to keep the remuneration for the local workforce at a low level. Employers can save the contributions for Medisave and retirement when employing foreigners.

With the rising costs of living, doubling of the rental costs for accommodation and even the property prices of the government-funded HDB apartments, there has been a growing unhappiness among Singaporeans.

The frustration of the Chinese bus drivers boiled over when the SMRT management neglected their complaints and demands for over half a year.

The main demand of the drivers focused on salary, bonus payments, working time and accommodation. In 2012, SMRT, which is 54 percent owned by the state investment firm Temasek Holdings, had raised the basic pay for Singaporean bus drivers from $1,375 to $1,600 Singapore dollars in two steps, the pay for Malaysian bus drivers from S$1,200 to S$1,400, and only from S$1,000 to S$1,075 for the Chinese drivers. While the Malaysian bus drivers receive a 13th month bonus payment every year, the Chinese bus drivers are paid only one month's salary at the end of their two-year contract.

Their demand was to receive at least the same payment as other foreign workers; they did not question the higher pay for Singaporean bus drivers. Further, they demanded that their accommodation be improved, as they have to share one bedroom with eight to ten persons, bed-to-bed. Some rooms are infested with bed bugs and other insects. With drivers working in different shifts, there is little chance for an undisturbed sleep.

SMRT had also introduced a six-day working week instead of the five-day week, starting on July 1, without seeking agreement by the workforce. While the weekly 44 working hours remain the same and are being spread over six days, the workers miss the overtime payment that they had received before when working an extra day.

The National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) had made no effort to support the Chinese bus drivers. On the weekend of November 24-25, this situation led to the latter's decision to take the matter into their own hands, not knowing about the strict laws in Singapore regulating any strike.

On Monday morning, November 26, 171 drivers refused to board the shuttle bus to their SMRT station and put forward their demands. This led to an immediate outcry of all government institutions involved in social and work related matters, which reverberated in the local news media. All hell broke loose, as this was the first "illegal" strike in Singapore

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for over 25 years.

Manpower Minister Tan Chuan Jin declared the industrial dispute as an "illegal strike" that had hurt "industrial harmony", and that the government had "zero tolerance for this". "Taking the law into your own hands is not acceptable under any circumstances—certainly especially when it involves essential services", he said.

During the entire day that Monday, SMRT management put pressure on the striking workers. Police went into the dormitories to intimidate the workers by threatening them with the legal consequences of their action. Medical teams were sent in to verify if some of the workers were entitled to claim sick leave. A delegation from the Chinese embassy went in to put additional pressure on the workers.

Despite all this activity, 88 workers continued their strike on Tuesday while the others went back to work for fear of losing their jobs.

Instead of supporting the workers, the NTUC issued a statement that the strike was illegal and "must and will be dealt with firmly, regardless of whether the workers are local or foreign".

Cham Hui Fong, assistant secretary-general of NTUC, said: "It's important that they understand that to resolve their issues is not through striking or not going back to work, but in communicating with people. If the management is not talking to them, then I think it's the role of the workers to make sure management listens to them". But that was exactly what the strike was about: "to make sure management listens to them".

Paragraph 9 of the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act in Singapore stipulates that any workers engaging in an illegal strike "shall be liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding $2,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 12 months or to both".

According to this law, workers should notify the management 14 days before they intend to go on strike and follow other regulations, which in total would undermine the whole purpose of the strike.

The local online newspaper TODAY reported on November 28: "When asked if they were worried about losing their jobs, one of the drivers involved in the strike said: 'We only resorted to this because we had no choice. What we are also hoping is for the company to resolve things in the quickest way'. Another driver, a 33-year-old from Henan province, said they felt that 'if we didn't speak up for ourselves, we could be further disadvantaged in the future'".

The intimidating actions from the side of the state authorities and the local trade union prevented any solidarity between the workers. The striking bus drivers were standing alone. On Wednesday, November 28, they went back to work, while SMRT took some cosmetic action regarding the dormitories, but without giving in to the salary demands.

The state authorities, however, did not lose time in following through with the threats they had announced earlier. In order to set a precedent, they arrested five of the strike leaders, He Jun Ling, 32, Gao Yue Qiang, 32, Liu Xiangying, 33, Wang Xianjie, 33, and Bao Feng Shan, 38, and charged them with instigating the drivers to take part in the strike. He Jun Ling was charged with the additional offense of making an online post about the strike. On Monday, December 3, Bao Feng Shan was sentenced to six weeks' jail for taking part in an illegal strike. The four remaining strike leaders will most likely face even stronger sentences.

On Saturday, December 1, 29 of the workers were picked up from their dormitories with their belongings gathered in plastic bags and brought to the Admiralty West Prison in Woodlands. They had their work permits revoked and were channeled to Changi Airport on the following day, shielded from the public by the police and flown out of Singapore back to China.

The strong reaction by the government signifies their fear of potential future workers struggles that could develop, not only among foreign workers, but with the local workforce as well, given the dependence of the Singaporean economy on the fragile world market and financial system.

The Workers Party that had gained a sensational support in the last national election (See "Singapore election reflects anti-government groundswell") demonstrated with a vague statement that they are anything but a defender of workers' interests. After complaining that "bus services were disrupted and commuters suffered inconveniences", they declared that to express their grievances, workers must act "within the bounds of the law". Concerning the arrests of workers, they refrained from any comment as "it would not be appropriate to comment on these specific cases", adding, "Our MPs will be asking the government questions on this issue during the next sitting of parliament".

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