Gross exploitation of migrant workers fuels riot in Singapore

Joseph Santolan
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A riot broke out in Singapore's Little India district on Sunday night after an Indian migrant worker was hit and killed by a bus. News reports indicate that approximately 400 people participated in the riots, overturning police cars and setting an ambulance on fire before being dispersed by anti-riot security forces.

The immediate cause of the riot was the death of Sakthivel Kumarvelu, an Indian migrant construction worker who was employed by a scaffolding company for two years. The reports are contradictory but indicate that he attempted to board a bus but was denied access, possibly because of overcrowding. He was then run over.

With Kumarvelu's body pinned under the bus, anger broke out in the crowded Sunday night streets of Little India, a portion of Singapore largely occupied by migrant workers from South Asia. Video footage shows several people attacking the windshield of the bus with a pole and a trash can.

Police arrived at the scene long before an ambulance did. Stones were thrown at police. Several police cars were overturned, at least one of them because it blocked the path of an ambulance. Five vehicles were set on fire.

By 11 p.m., 300 police officers had arrived on the scene and dispersed the crowd. Most of the police present were members of the Gurkha contingent—security forces hired from Nepal by the city-state particularly to police the South Asian migrant population.

At least 27 people were arrested; 24 from India, two from Bangladesh and one Singaporean national. Rioting in Singapore is punishable by seven years in prison and whipping with a cane.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong issued a press statement, saying: "There is no excuse for such violent and criminal behavior." He announced that a Committee of Inquiry would look into the reasons for the riot and how it was handled. In what is clearly a preparation for further crackdowns on migrant workers, Lee said the committee would review how the government manages areas where foreign workers congregate.

The December 8 riot was the largest expression of violent social anger in Singapore in a half century. It is an open expression of the explosive levels of class hostility that have been bred by the growth of grotesque levels of social inequality.

Migrant workers account for one quarter of Singapore's 5.4 million residents and over a third of the labor force. In one of the wealthiest cities in Asia, these workers live in appalling conditions and are paid subsistence-level wages. Singapore is the only country in the region that has no form of mandatory minimum wage.

Migrant workers, officially labeled "transient workers," are legally allowed in Singapore only for the labor they are performing. Their work permits ban them from marrying a Singaporean citizen and from changing jobs.

An investigative report by Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), a Singaporean NGO, in August 2012 shed light on the plight of transient construction workers in the city.

Migrant workers are obliged to pay kickbacks and intermediary fees before obtaining a job and a work permit. These fees are paid by the worker's family going into debt to local money lenders in the country of origin, predominantly India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

For a first contract, an inexperienced worker will pay an average of $S7,256 ($US5,807) in intermediary fees

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to an employment agency to obtain the job and work permits. A large portion will be paid to the employer in the form of kickbacks for hiring the worker. An inexperienced migrant construction worker will be paid $S18 a day. It will take the average worker 17.5 months of work simply to cover their placement fees.

At the end of a one- or two-year contract, workers must pay their employer a contract renewal fee that amounts to an average of $S1,081. This is the equivalent of another 10 weeks of work, assuming a 6-day work week.

Many migrant workers were sent home before the conclusion of their contract, often because a construction project was completed. TWC2 estimated that 21 percent of migrant workers return home without paying off their debt for the initial intermediary fees.

Transient construction workers, such as Sakthivel Kumarvelu, live on the job site. A worker interviewed by the *Daily Beast* last month, said: "Every month I made $400—$500. *Makan* [food] was about $100. I sent home $250—$300." This was not enough, he stated, to keep creditors from harassing his family back home.

Wages are routinely not paid. Many go for months without seeing a pay check. A worker may file a complaint with the Labor Ministry. They must pay a fee of $S80-240—up to 10 days' wages—to compensate their employer for the difficulty of responding to the complaint.

Singapore is also home to the extremely wealthy. Luxury is ostentatiously on display throughout the city. Singapore's Gini coefficient—the leading metric of income disparity—is the second highest in the developed world.

A March 2013 *Wall Street Journal* report on wealth in Singapore stated: "Wealth-X, a private consultancy that provides intelligence on the world's uber-rich, estimates some 1,400 ultra-high-net-worth individuals now hold more than $160 billion of wealth in Singapore … The toys of all these millionaires and billionaires are visible across the city-state. A country roughly the size of San Francisco, it now has 449 Ferraris, up from 142 in 2001, while its Maserati fleet has grown from 24 to 469. Yacht clubs are popping up along with super-luxurious shops, like the Louis Vuitton Island Maison, a flagship boutique of the ubiquitous luxury brand housed in its own floating pavilion." The Pangaea nightclub served a cocktail laced with a diamond for $26,000.

Singapore serves as the center of finance capital in Southeast Asia. The ruling class relies on the police-state to protect its assets in the face of the mass poverty of the working class. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "what really checks all the right boxes for many of the world's ultra-rich is Singapore's obsession with order."

The police maintain this "order" by cracking down on all signs of dissent, and by routinely chasing away undesirable workers from "loitering" in public spaces. As well as police-state measures, the political and media establishment deliberately whips up animosities toward foreign workers.

The highly visible and obscene inequality of Singapore is fueling a deep class hostility in the millions of workers who build and service the city. The riot in Little India is an initial and still formless expression of this anger. It will not be the last.

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