

issue 1: charanpal bal's

migrant deportability



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EXPLAINED**

there are many myths about migrant workers in Singapore...

the workers never complain what, why you all complain?

actually ah, everyone is equally to blame for this

after they work in S'pore, they go home very rich

These misconceptions are however often proven untrue by a large body of ground research and workers' experience...

This issue is based on research by: **Dr. Charanpal Bal**, a researcher at University of Western Australia, who has conducted groundbreaking work on migrant labour political economy in Singapore. His research was based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic participant observation where he "worked" as a steel-fitter in the industry for four months.



what is deportability ?

According to Dr. Charanpal Bal ¹

it means “can send
back home anytime”



Repatriation (deportation) laws according to Bal are a key feature of our economic model of dependence on temporary, low-wage, low-skilled migrant labour. Their disposability makes it easy to deport and hence control workers.

*Bal borrows from what
Brenda Yeoh ² calls...*

a use-and-discard
economic model

*such a model built on
two systemic conditions
of migrant labour in SG*

1. political powerlessness
2. structural precarity



1. political powerlessness* 3

Unlike Singaporeans, migrant workers and their interests are **not represented by unions** or Members of Parliament. Illiberal labour laws also prohibit collective labour organising and **no ability to advocate for policy reforms**, unlike in Taiwan or South Korea. With no voting powers, they also have no political capital.

** Political rights indeed exist on a spectrum, and foreign workers around the world may not be afforded the same labour rights as citizens. Nonetheless, there is much debate on what should be minimum standards of universal rights. Studying conditions of political powerlessness is also an important area of analysis to better understand labour and policy conditions.*

2. structural precarity/vulnerability

Migrant workers are all in heavy debt – paying exorbitant recruitment fees through (sometimes corrupt) agents to secure a job in Singapore. Heavy **debts worsen the effects of repatriation or reprisals** if they report abuses or injury claims, and hence they often do not dare to. Research shows that some Bangladeshi workers paid an average of \$15,000 in 2015⁴ despite MOM regulations that fees cannot be higher than 2-months worth of basic salary.



Recruitment fees continues to be a huge issue faced by migrant workers globally. Workers sometimes even return home in greater debt. ¹ Researchers and advocates say the lack of effective state monitoring of the recruitment process results in continued scams and exorbitant fees.

thus, when migrant workers are exploited, they have limited recourse

some issues are also more severe than others...

Also important to note that these patterns of exploitation are fundamentally enabled by the underlying structures of the political economy

no choice lah! if can tahan, just keep quiet lor, otherwise will kenna :(

- Illegal forced repatriation
(common after work injuries or work disputes)
- No access to medical care
(especially during work injuries)
- Employer collusion with errant doctors
- Prevention from making injury claims
- Wage payment arrears
- Premature termination
- Unreasonable salary deductions
- Kickbacks for job contract renewal
- Exorbitant agent fees
- Unpaid medical leave wages
- Misrepresentation of salary terms
(hiring/salary scams during recruitment)
- Poor dormitory conditions
- Poor food quality

Ultimately, errant employers are **emboldened by limited labour protections** and limited power of workers

Amidst the Covid-19 crisis, Alex Au (TWC2) has also written about how "dorms are not the problem". According to NGO reporting, workers are often more concerned with more severe issues than those that they can just "tahan".⁵

when workers face grievances



a. tactical accommodation



Bal found that workers usually choose to **remain obedient and accept conditions** because of the risks and economic costs of raising a labour dispute

But, if the grievance is severe and cannot be tahan...



b. lodge an MOM complaint

Bal found that going through the dispute process was risky for workers – already vulnerable to harassment and threat of illegal repatriation by errant employers.

**Bal also writes that the illiberal political laws and structures (1) depoliticises disputes, and (2) individualises disputes, channeling them away from collective, structural policy reforms*

If still cannot settle, or cannot reach MOM...



c. strike / sit-in



This is usually the desperate last resort and often has little tangible gains with “instigators” quietly repatriated by the state, like in the 2012 SMRT bus strike and other incidences of labour unrest

“The **slightest hint of disobedience** inevitably unleashes the coercive capacity of their employers... **threats, violence and forceful repatriation**. These responses often pose an **immediate threat to workers’** economic and physical well-being.”

— Bal 2015 p. 232

why policy change is slow and difficult



over the years, ground up NGOs like HOME and TWC2 have emerged, advocating for reforms while providing direct services



migrant workers cannot self-organise and depend on small groups of concerned citizens to push for change



according to Bal and other scholars, stronger ground-up advocacy for structural change is constrained by the political economic system:*

1. political illiberalism³

Civil society space is severely restricted due to illiberal nature of state-society relations in Singapore.⁶ This restricts the ability of civil society groups to push for change, and they must do so strategically and carefully.



2. tripartite system

Bal writes that the system is a means of “**co-option and political control** of collective labour as it determines which collective actors are able to participate in the resolution of industrial disputes”, and individual workers are unable to participate in the collective bargaining level.

** Check out Garry Rodan's Democracy without Participation for more info!*

what can we learn from this?

this is not just a social problem

1

This is fundamentally a **problem of political economy**, based on models, policies, laws, modes of governance, state-society relationships that have laid the structural groundwork for such migratory flows and conditions.

blame is not equal

2

We are all indeed complicit as members of this economy who benefit from cheap labour. However, **this is a systemic issue** more than just individual. The **state plays an outsized role in constructing this political economy** and consequently, has ultimate responsibility for securing improved labour rights and protections.

"government regulations contribute substantially to systematic exploitation and abuse... workers are abused not simply because some employers fail to follow the rules. Rather, certain rules create a propensity for employers to abuse and exploit workers. Some rules leave workers vulnerable to abuse. At the same time, insufficient rules exist to protect workers from abuse." ⁷

food for thought

1. Is this use-and-discard model economically sustainable? What are the hidden economic costs to this model? Are there alternate models?
2. Is this system ethical? How can we do better as a nation? How can we innovate our political economic models?
3. Does the tripartite system of labour relations benefit workers (not just migrants) in Singapore? Should migrant workers be allowed to unionise? Do we still need to have such restrictive political rights nowadays?
4. Can we afford to treat migrant workers better? Should we consider a minimum wage law for migrant workers?



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*In fact, our **migrant labour is NOT cheap**. There are large hidden costs. The foreign worker levy system distorts market prices and results in costs being transferred to workers through depressed wages and increased incidences of illegal kickbacks. ¹ In some cases, the monthly levy of workers are up to four times their wages! ⁸*

glossary of terms

myth

Social constructions of “truth” by popular opinion, media or state agencies which reinforce sometimes inaccurate narratives thus affecting policy-making.

political
economy

Economic systems and their intertwined relationship with laws and governance.

structural
precarity

Economic and political vulnerability due to the systemic conditions created by laws, policies, economic relations, social circumstances.

deportability

A condition of vulnerability where workers may be deported easily (built on a model of disposable economic labour) hence allowing easier political control.

illiberalism

A system of governance with limitations on civil liberties (e.g. free speech, labour rights).

collective
labour action

Workers have more bargaining power as a group (than as individuals). Collective action can include strikes or institutional negotiations.

civil society

the “third” sector of society (the others being govt and businesses), consisting of independent citizens, academics, community groups, and NGOs, etc. It plays an important role in a well-functioning democratic society.

Visit bit.ly/CAPEbigideas for more terms in other issues!

recommended readings!

- Myths and Facts of Migrant Workers in Singapore by Bal (2017): <https://newnaratif.com/research/myths-and-facts-migrant-workers-in-singapore/>
- Alex Au from TWC2 explains why dorms are not the problem (2020): <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/01/the-dorms-are-not-the-problem/>
- Researcher Shona Long explores who is responsible (2020): <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/who-is-responsible-for-singapores-migrant-workers-and-why-does-it-matter/>
- Singapore Policy Journal explores what could a fairer migrant worker policy look like (2020): <https://spj.hkspublications.org/2020/05/04/what-could-a-fairer-migrant-worker-policy-look-like/>

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2. Brenda Yeoh (2006). Bifurcated labour: The unequal incorporation of transmigrants in Singapore. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 97 (1) : 26-37.
3. Charanpal S. Bal (2015) Production Politics and Migrant Labour Advocacy in Singapore, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 45:2, 219-242
4. TWC2. (2017). Average recruitment cost hit \$15,000 in 2015 for first-time Bangladeshi construction workers. <https://twc2.org.sg/2017/02/05/average-recruitment-cost-hit-15000-in-2015-for-first-time-bangladeshi-construction-workers/>
5. Alex Au. (2020). The dorms are not the problem. TWC2. <http://twc2.org.sg/2020/05/01/the-dorms-are-not-the-problem/>
6. Rodan, G. 1996. "State–Society Relations and Political Opposition in Singapore." In *Political Opposition in Industrialising Asia*, edited by G. Rodan, 95–127. London: Routledge.
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8. TWC2. (2015). Land reclamation worker's salary just \$227 a month. <https://twc2.org.sg/2015/11/20/land-reclamation-workers-salary-just-227-a-month/>

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Much of Singaporean academia remains inaccessible to the public due to jargon or paywalls, thus impacting citizen participation in policy conversations and civic engagement. This issue is part of an infographic project by CAPE to digest and repackage theories, knowledge, and research by our homegrown academics for the Singaporean public.



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