

Employers urge caution amid calls to cut back foreign worker pool

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Singapore

AMID calls from some quarters for a reduction in the number of migrant workers in Singapore, several trade associations and commerce chambers have urged the government to take a considered and calibrated approach to migrant worker policies.

In separate statements all issued on Wednesday, they highlighted that reducing the number of foreign workers (FWs) would adversely affect Singapore's economy and jobs, increase costs as well as blunt the nation's competitiveness.

They also stressed the important role FWs play in complementing the local workforce, given Singapore's limited labour force, ageing population and Singaporeans' disdain for labour-intensive jobs in favour of professional, managers, executives and technicians (PMET) positions.

In an interview with Channel News Asia on Wednesday, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat said that digitalisation could be a way for Singapore to be more productive and efficient, while reducing its reliance on labour.

In the built environment, for instance, the government is planning to look at how to create better jobs for Singaporeans while reducing the manual element. However, Mr Heng added: "I must caution there is a limit

to how far we can go. We still need to rely on a significant proportion of our foreign workers to do very difficult jobs which many Singaporeans will not want to do."

In a statement on Wednesday, Ng Yek Meng, president of the Singapore Contractors Association Ltd (SCAL), said: "Singapore is not yet in a position to easily do away with foreign manpower. As technology improves and the industry here takes on more advanced resources, we will work to change the way we build. But this will take time. The number of FWs can be reduced when the number of construction projects and developments decrease as well."

Mr Ng also pointed out that a reduction in the number of FWs would result in a hike in construction costs and lengthen construction timelines for housing projects such as HDB flats, making it tougher for companies to compete for strategic projects as well as boosting home prices.

In Singapore, FWs form the backbone of the construction sector, which employs about 300,000 FWs and nearly 100,000 locals.

The vast majority of Covid-19 cases in Singapore have been from the migrant worker community, which has turned attention to their housing conditions and prompting some non-governmental organisations to call for changes to migrant worker policies, including improving their living conditions.

In a joint statement, the Singapore

Manufacturing Federation (SMF), the Association of Singapore Process Industries (ASPRI) and Association of Singapore Marine Industries (ASMI) said: "Should Singapore lose its competitive edge in various industries, demand for labour will fall and jobs, livelihoods and businesses will be at stake. Consequently, there will also be fewer PMET jobs for Singaporeans, such as those in the export-oriented industries."

On the working conditions for foreign workers in Singapore, the statement said: "Like any job seeker, migrant workers are presented with job opportunities here in Singapore and have a choice whether or not to take the role. In addition, employers are responsible under the law for providing safe housing conditions for our migrant workers."

SMF, ASMI and ASPRI also noted that Singapore offers a housing system for migrant workers – which is not normal practice elsewhere – and that many employers also offer benefits such as healthcare as part of the employment package. Meanwhile, "our migrant workers also know that they have channels to seek recourse if they feel that they have been unfairly treated," they added.

Errant employers and dormitory operators are the exception rather than the norm in Singapore, SMF, ASMI and ASPRI went on to say. "We will support the government to take firm action against these 'black sheep' in the industry."



Foreign workers at the Thomson-East Coast Line. Employers say they have a crucial role to play as businesses emerge from the circuit breaker.

BT FILE PHOTO

While housing conditions here for FWs can be improved, comparatively they are one of the best in the region, Mr Ng said. FWs here also "earn significantly more" than they would at home, while many employers encourage their workers to take on educational courses and training, he added.

Thomas Ang, president of the Specialists Trade Alliance of Singapore (STAS), said: "The large majority of our employers are responsible to their migrant workers. As a baseline, the regulatory framework for migrant workers in areas such as housing, employment privileges and workplace safety and health is robust and has progressively improved over the years. We note that most employers comply with these regulations." STAS represents the specialist contractors and suppliers in the building and construction industry.

Mr Ang went on to add that most migrant workers choose to remain in Singapore "well beyond their initial contracts" which indicates "generally positive relations" between employers and migrant workers here. "During this challenging time, we have stood by our migrant workers in ensuring their salaries are paid and food and other means of support are provided to them."

If there are fewer FWs and rank-and-file jobs cannot be entirely filled by locals, this could mean higher costs and inconveniences for Singaporeans, reckons Mr Ang. For instance, a reduced number of FWs to complement the local workforce could result in "further strains" on servicing lifts and escalators, he pointed out.

Meanwhile, in their statement, the Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SICCI), the Singa-

pore Malay Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SMCCI), and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) pointed out that migrant workers typically handle the "lower-end jobs" here, which enables Singaporeans to take on other roles. "This allows the vast majority of Singaporeans to take on PMET jobs, and helps in creating an innovation-based economy as well. Thus, we urge the government and Singaporeans to carefully consider the next steps on migrant workers."

Finally, as businesses slowly emerge from the circuit breaker, they will still need to contend with issues such as a manpower crunch and increased business costs, the various associations and chambers noted. As such, companies will need to rely on FWs to keep businesses going and to help the economy recover, they added.

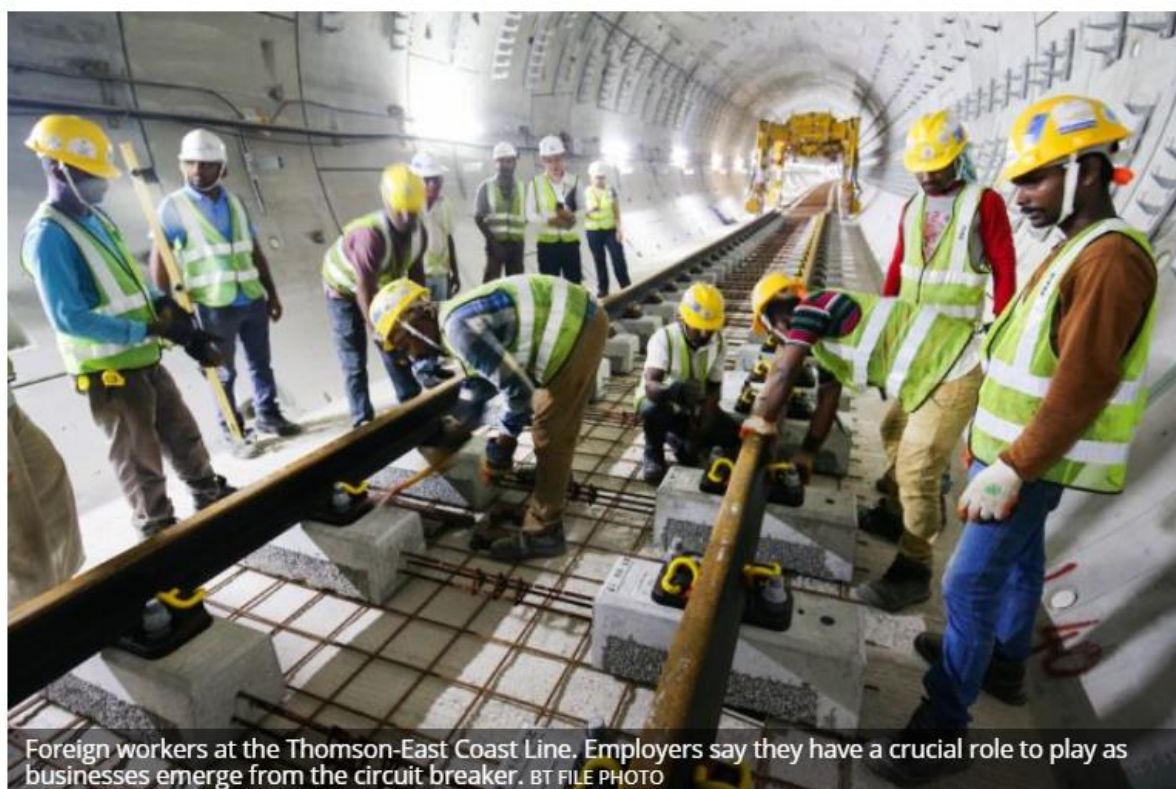
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🕒 THU, MAY 28, 2020 - 5:50 AM

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Foreign workers at the Thomson-East Coast Line. Employers say they have a crucial role to play as businesses emerge from the circuit breaker. BT FILE PHOTO

<https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/employers-urge-caution-amid-calls-to-cut-back-foreign-worker-pool>

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