[The sorry state of unions in Singapore » Waging Nonviolence](http://wagingnonviolence.org/)

**The sorry state of unions in Singapore**

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[](http://wagingnonviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Screen-shot-2012-06-01-at-PM-12.50.27.png)

Tripartite partners from the Ministry of Manpower, the Singapore National Employers Federation, the National Trade Union Congress at the May Day Rally 2012. Photo credit: NTUC

On May 24, an article was published in *The Straits Times* on the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and its commitment to the workers of Singapore. Only it didn’t seem to be a proper article; it was shared on both [Twitter](http://https/twitter.com/STcom/status/206042001714577408) and [Facebook](http://https/www.facebook.com/TheStraitsTimes/posts/179386665524015) with an “advertorial” disclaimer. Closer inspection found that it was part of a series of articles and videos [featured](http://www.straitstimes.com/The-Big-Story/The-Big-Story-4/The-Big-Story-4_20120426.html) on *The Straits Times’* website, “brought to you by NTUC.”

Yup. Our national confederation of trade unions bought ad space to assure people that it cares about the workers it represents.

This comes after it emerged that although bus drivers from the privatized public transport company SMRT received a wage increase, their work week was also changed from a five-day to a six-day week. A number of bus drivers sent an [email](http://theonlinecitizen.com/2012/05/smrt-bus-service-drivers-blow-the-whistle/) to the press (including alternative websites) pointing out that the additional day’s work completely undermined any pay increase they were supposed to receive. The bus drivers — who chose to remain anonymous — also expressed unhappiness that their union had not helped them.

In TODAYonline’s [article](http://www.todayonline.com/Hotnews/EDC120522-0000058/Pay-rise-for-SMRT-drivers-,,,-and-a-6-day-week), the changes were supported and defended by NTUC Deputy Secretary-General Ong Ye Kung. The next day, the National Transport Workers’ Union (NTWU) signaled their [support](http://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC120523-0000062/Union-explains-SMRTs-new-pay-framework) for the change by coming forward to explain the new pay framework.

Although unions in Singapore have for years been criticized for neglecting the demands and voices of workers, this episode with SMRT and its bus drivers revived an outpouring of frustration and anger towards NTUC.

However, the May 24 advertorial insisted that NTUC was not a “toothless body,” and asserted that the unions had occasionally threatened employers with strikes.

**Striking in Singapore**

Singapore has been mostly strike-free for years. The last major strike came from the shipping industry in 1986, after then-President Ong Teng Cheong sanctioned it without informing the Cabinet. The issue was resolved within two days, but President Ong’s actions angered certain Cabinet members. Since then, strikes — other than the occasional ones carried out by [migrant workers](http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2012/02/07/migrant-worker-sit-in-makes-waves-in-singapore/) — have been more or less unheard of in the city-state.

Strikes and lock-outs in essential services — such as public transport services, broadcasting services and civil defense services — are covered under the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act. Workers in gas, electricity and water services are prohibited from striking, whilst others are not allowed to strike unless at least 14 days’ notice has been given, or while official conciliation proceedings are pending.

The Trade Disputes Act goes further, outlawing industrial action if:

a. it has any other object than the furtherance of a trade dispute within the trade or industry in which the persons taking part in the industrial action are engaged;

b. it is in furtherance of a trade dispute of which an Industrial Arbitration Court has cognizance; or

c. it is designed or calculated to coerce the Government either directly or by inflicting hardship on the community.

The penalty for participating in illegal industrial action can either come in the form of a fine of up to S$2,000 (approx. US$1,588) or imprisonment for a period of up to six months.

Singapore also has strict laws regarding protests and demonstrations, and all “cause-related activities” are governed under the Public Order Act. A single person can be considered to constitute an illegal assembly if he or she does not have a police permit to carry out the activity.

All these laws come together to make industrial action a difficult option. For the average worker, the possibility of trying to initiate a strike is slim. And although NTUC said in its advertorial that they have threatened strikes before, this may come as a surprise to Singaporean workers. Despite all the grievances of working Singaporeans, there have been no union-led strikes for over 20 years, and decisions — such as the decision to adjust the pay and workdays of the SMRT bus drivers — are often made unilaterally, and the workers informed afterwards.

**Tripartism, or just plain conflict of interest?**

Singapore has adopted the model of tripartism, where the government steps in to intervene and mediate between employers and employees. The Tripartite partners of Singapore are the Ministry of Manpower, NTUC and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF).

The original idea behind tripartism was to prevent disruptions and nasty disagreements between workers and their bosses, but has since become a cause for concern with regard to conflicts of interest, where the same person ends up wearing lots of different hats when he or she should just have the one.

Case in point: NTUC Deputy Secretary-General Ong Ye Kung is the executive secretary of the National Transport Workers’ Union. But he is also a board member of SMRT Corporation. On top of that, he is also a member of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), and stood as a candidate in the 2011 general election (although he didn’t get into parliament).

So, to sum up: a union leader is also on the board of the profit-driven company that employs the very public transport workers he is meant to represent, andalso a member of the party that forms the current government. He is Tripartite all in himself!

And it isn’t just him: union members are sometimes [tapped](http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/pap-likely-introduce-more-candidates-ntuc-20110315-003412-719.html) to stand as candidates for the PAP in elections. Some even go on to become government ministers.

Lim Swee Say, currently a minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, shuffles between union and government. He was the deputy secretary-general of NTUC from 1997 − 1999, until he left to become the Minister for Trade and Industry. Five years and two other ministerial portfolios later, he was back to being the deputy secretary-general of NTUC again. In 2007 he became the secretary-general of NTUC, and holds the post until today.

Although the government would hold this up as an example of successful tripartism, many Singaporeans see this as a situation where ministers, union leaders and employers work together to forward their own interests at the expense of the ordinary Singaporean. Critics have often pointed out the many conflicts of interest that arise from such a porous system — how can the union leader speak for the employees when he is also on the board of the company, or part of the government that pushes through economic policies that do not help the working class?

**Why do you smile so much?**

In the advertorial in *The Straits Times*, NTUC’s Assistant Secretary-General Cham Hui Foong said that the trade unions had “teeth” and that they could “choose to bite or give a smile.”

Which then begs the question: why do you smile so much?

Perhaps trade unions do speak up a lot for the workers in closed-door meetings. But the discussions or actions taken by the unions in these meetings aren’t often made public. People can only judge by what they see, which does not always inspire the most confidence.

When top economists such as [Lim Chong Yah](http://www.asiaone.com/Business/News/Story/A1Story20120410-338821.html) and [Yeoh Lam Keong](http://www2.straitstimes.com/Review/Others/STIStory_800125.html) spoke out about Singapore’s growing income equality and recommended structural changes to prepare for the future, NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee Say [disagreed](http://www.todayonline.com/Singapore/EDC120414-0000055/Wage-restructuring-too-risky--Lim) and took the government’s stance.

Recently the National Wage Council (part of NTUC) recommended that the wages of low-income workers be increased by at least S$50 a month. However, critics have pointed out that it is [much less](http://berthahenson.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/more-money-for-doing-more/) than the wage restructuring proposed by Professor Lim Chong Yah, and that such a small increase is unlikely to help low-income workers deal with [inflation](http://yeejj.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/my-speech-at-hougang-by-election-rally-24-may-2012/), which has hit 5.4 percent.

Whenever the issue of the minimum wage is raised, union leaders hasten to say that it is [not the solution](http://justice4workerssingapore.blogspot.com/2011/01/ntuc-chief-opposes-minimum-wage.html) for Singapore. Like the government, they emphasize increasing productivity or additional skills training to, in the words of  Lim Swee Say, build a “[cheaper, better, faster](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1011584/1/.html)” economy.

**Perceptions of the NTUC**

In early May I tweeted:

It had been just for fun, but the tweet was retweeted over 50 times (Twitter stops counting after 50), and I received many replies. Not a single one spoke up in support of the unions; mostly they just wanted to remind me of the redeemable movie-and-popcorn combos and restaurant deals. Apart from the usefulness of some of NTUC’s insurance plans, the sense that I get from talking about unions to Singaporeans is that NTUC has not truly represented the ordinary worker for a long, long time, and is now seen more as an extension of the ruling party.

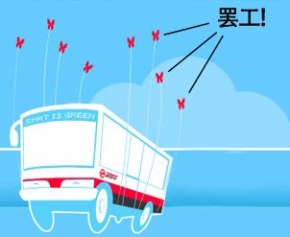
If the NTUC really wants to rehabilitate its image and demonstrate the usefulness of its “teeth” it has a long way to go. Perhaps one way to start would be to stop buying ad space in the newspaper instead of engaging more with disgruntled workers.

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| |  | | --- | |  |   **Workers****Needed: More protection** A million foreign arrivals on a lower scale of salaries have sharply raised protection needs for Singaporean workers. By Seah Chiang Nee Jul 22, 2012, Little Speck  WHO is ultimately responsible for protecting the rights and interests of Singapore’s 2.5 million workers – the Manpower Ministry or the city’s only trade union body?  A cynical reply could be: No difference, since they are like different arms of the same government.  The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), a network of 61 trade unions and one taxi association, with 700,000 members is affiliated to the ruling People’s Action Party.  It is led by a cabinet minister attached to the Prime Minister’s office.  With its no-confrontation strategy, NTUC has kept Singapore away from strikes and industrial unrest for decades.  Today the arrival of a million foreign workers and a changing political scenario are creating a new labour environment for the unions.  Some observers are questioning how long this formula of government control of unions and workers – which had worked well in the past – can continue to keep the peace.  The workforce has now exceeded three million, with a third being foreign workers who came with their own practices and values. Their presence has created a large impact on locals, including NTUC members.  It has directly and indirectly caused a host of new conflicts that are not within easy solution for both ministry and NTUC, with so much preoccupation given to economic growth.  It is like a second evolution for NTUC that requires a review of its role to be able to truly represent all Singaporean workers.  The first was caused by the end of the industrial era in Singapore, which hit NTUC hard.  It eradicated most of the large factories that hired thousands of workers who provided the backbone of its strength.  The new service companies that followed are employing much smaller staff that are harder to unionise. The American unions had declined for the same reason.  The fall in membership took NTUC years – and many social attractions and incentives – to rebuild. Added to it was the workers’ belief that joining a government-related union had limited use.  Today, a new situation is in place with the presence of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers. It is confronting the NTUC with a different sort of problem.  Its current role is restricted by the fact that it represents only 28% of the workforce, to which it is beholden to fight for.  The other 72% of Singapore workers have no union representation and practically have to depend on the Manpower Ministry – or the goodness of their employers – when they need help.  How does the mass intake of “cheaply paid” overseas workers contribute to labour uncertainties here?  Answer: By their easy availability, foreigners have made it easier for exploitative bosses to sack Singaporeans on the flimsiest of excuses, knowing that there are lower-cost alternatives.  When such cases happen, the NTUC finds itself caught in the middle between unhappy workers and employers who usually get away with it.  “Some employers are taking advantage of the situation to act unfairly against Singaporean workers,” said a union official.  Last week, for example, a Singaporean national serviceman was reportedly sacked on a month’s notice by his company one day before he was due to report for reservist training.  He wrote that he complained to the Manpower Ministry, which allegedly told him that it could not do anything since the company had already given him a month’s notice.  On the same day, there was another case. A woman worker who confirmed her pregnancy was pressured by her foreign manager to resign from her job.  (Both complaints are occasionally aired. Some managers avoid having their workers spend time on reservist duties or pregnant ones given natal leave by hiring foreigners.)  By far, the worst problem in Singapore’s new environment is caused by foreign managers who hire or promote their own nationalities over Singaporeans despite government warning.  The Minister of State for Manpower Tan Chuan-Jin last year announced new guidelines against discriminatory practices against Singaporeans, including job advertisements indicating a preference for foreigners.  In the first nine months of last year, there were 51 such cases of unfair treatment.  His ministry, Tan warned, would act against employers who refused to stop discrimination. Despite this, the Singaporean worker is still short-shifted with no action from the unions.  On the other side of the coin are cases of local firms exploiting foreign workers by under-paying or over-working them – even refusing to pay their wages.  As Singapore progresses from Third to First World, some of its old institutions like NTUC may find themselves needing to reform to meet new challenges.  NTUC was formed in 1961 with a political objective – defeating its leftist rival, SATU or Singapore Association of Trade Unions.  After it won, the Congress maintained its political role of keeping opposition parties from forming trade unions. For that it has to attract as many workers as possible into its fold.  In the past 51 years, NTUC has spoken for workers in tripartite (employer-union-government) negotiations on disputes and pay increases, as well as run a vast business empire.  It also conducts mediation and research and plays a special role in helping senior workers re-employed.  But Singapore has changed; today’s labour needs far exceed this role.  The PAP’s political leaders are pragmatic enough to say that it may be voted out of power one day – and that none of its policies are beyond change by future generations.  “Nothing is cast in stone,” former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew once said, which means everything in life changes.  If that is so, shouldn’t Singapore’s trade unions sever relationship with political parties? |
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**Foreign labour in Singapore**

**One strike and you're out**

Nov 29th 2012, 2:16 by Banyan | SINGAPORE



SO RARE is industrial action in Singapore that the government and press seem to be hazy about the vocabulary. When 171 bus drivers employed by SMRT, a government-owned firm, refused to go to work on November 26th and staged a sit-in at their dormitory, the *Straits Times*, a pro-government daily, termed it an “action”, “protest”, “episode” and “wage dispute”. Only later was the “s” word dragged out of the dictionary. After dozens of drivers stayed away from work for a second day, the front-page headline on November 28th was: “Govt moves against illegal strike.”

“Mr Brown”, [a local blogger](http://www.mrbrown.com/), noticing the reluctance to call a stoppage a strike, asked his Twitter followers for suggestions for other options. Among the ideas were “unhappy gathering”, “disgruntled sit-in” and, in a dig at the government’s  much-touted effort to reconnect with its people, “the national bus drivers’ conversation”.

Yet the reticence was understandable for at least three reasons. First, “strike” is [a technical term](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22e7cd017b-6259-4fbd-ac9f-59664543f2e9%22%20Status%3Ainforce%20Depth%3A0;rec=0) for a form of protest that, for those in “essential services”, such as public transport, is [illegal unless 14 days' advance notice is given](http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22a0f19883-86d3-46d3-8f92-17c578f590cd%22%20Status%3Apublished%20Depth%3A0;rec=0). Second, and presumably for that reason, strikes are extremely rare in Singapore. The *Straits Times* reckoned this was the first since 1986, and that was a legal one. The last “illegal” strike was in 1980.

Third, the strikers were mainland-Chinese workers, whose grievance was that they were paid less than other foreign drivers, such as Malaysians. Company spokesmen were quoted as saying this is because the Chinese receive other benefits, such as dormitory accommodation. Another complaint, however, is about the quality of the dormitories. The government may have wanted to restrain popular resentment against Chinese immigrants, in this case for whingeing and refusing to accept Singapore’s orderly laws and customs.

Many bus drivers in Singapore are mainland Chinese—more than 1,000 out of a total of 7,300—and, to this random passenger, many seem extremely grumpy. Understandably so, perhaps. But they are unlikely to find much sympathy for their wage-dispute episode. Singapore’s acting minister of manpower, Tan Chuan-jin, offered “zero tolerance for such unlawful action”.

Many Singapore residents resent the influx in recent years of mainland Chinese. Much criticism is directed at the allegedly boorish behaviour of well-off Chinese flaunting their wealth in Singapore. But, at the other end of the social scale, poor workers blame Chinese-immigrant competition for depressing wages.

The Chinese embassy in Singapore offered limited sympathy for its protesting citizens, but stressed they had to follow local laws, and reportedly intervened to help bring the strike to a close after just two days.

Singapore now relies on importing labour on a large scale from China and elsewhere. But it also prides itself on its almost immaculate record of labour discipline, as part of its appeal to global investors. The strikers are unlikely to find their transgression forgotten, let alone forgiven.

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