

# The People's Manifesto

2024

A Singapore Grassroots Initiative

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2024

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## What is The People's Manifesto?

Healthcare workers, students, community organisers, researchers, social workers, writers, artists, environmentalists and others from different walks of life in Singapore have come together in 2024, ahead of the General Election, to pen the first ever People's Manifesto, highlighting the key reforms we believe are the most urgent for a more socially and economically just Singapore which neglects no one, and where all our diverse communities can thrive.

**The People's Manifesto** (2024) puts forward exciting and practical ideas across seven areas, as a start: (1) rebuilding a democratic society, (2) arresting the rising cost of living, (3) improving working conditions for all workers, (4) providing public housing for all, (5) ensuring retirement adequacy, (6) making healthcare affordable and accessible, and (7) tackling the climate crisis. These ideas come from the lived experience and wisdom of ordinary people, and are validated through rigorous research by practitioners in each area.

This first iteration of **The People's Manifesto** is a modest effort, focusing on the most urgent issues that are alive for a wide cross-section of Singapore's communities. In the years to come, the Manifesto will continue to expand and evolve, through the collective efforts of even more communities and practitioners, and cover areas such as education, law and justice, and international relations.

**The People's Manifesto** is committed to holding up a mirror to all of us who call Singapore home, reflecting our pain, our struggles, our values, hopes and dreams. As Singapore's political landscape evolves, this Manifesto is an intervention that underscores the possibilities and desires for a different social compact between the state and citizens - one where the people come together to debate and generate policy ideas that will better serve us, and can expect political leaders to learn from us with sincerity, openness and humility.

Citizens deserve a much stronger voice in shaping Singapore's future, and to participate in this process on our own terms, not just those set by the government. Existing and aspiring political representatives must take the lead from the people as experts of our own lives, and stewards of our shared futures. This Manifesto is a testament to the political maturity and sophisticated ideas that ordinary people have to bring about more well-being, justice and progress for everyone in Singapore.

## To (Re)build a Democratic Society

For any society to truly flourish, it is important that the people are empowered to participate freely and safely in public discourse and politics, and shape policies at macro and micro levels through exercising their civil and political rights. Politics has a powerful impact on every aspect of our lives, and we have both a right and a responsibility to speak up about injustice, organise ourselves and take collective action to improve our lives and that of our fellow people.

Dissent and contestation are healthy, generative features of a democratic society. No single person, group, or political party has a monopoly on wisdom about how a country should be run. Far from the stereotype of the politically apathetic Singaporean, it is evident in all kinds of spaces, from social media, coffee shops, taxi rides, to elections and Speakers' Corner rallies that people of all backgrounds care deeply about how the country is run, and have well-formed opinions on changes they want to see. With increasingly complex social, economic and geopolitical realities to navigate, it is critical that Singapore has a vibrant, democratic society that encourages its people to be active citizens without fear of sanction.

Yet Singapore currently ranks 66th globally in the 2021 democracy index [1]. In the region, Singapore ranks 12th, behind Indonesia, Philippines, and Malaysia. Experts describe Singapore as either a flawed democracy [1] or an authoritarian state [2]. Despite pledging to “build a democratic society based on justice and equality”, the government has increasingly eroded the space for people to express themselves freely.

When the government speaks of consultation and engagement, it is overwhelmingly on their own narrow and undemocratic terms. There is little to no transparency on who participated, what the views expressed were, and how these views were taken into consideration in decision-making. Closed-door consultations with civil society groups and other stakeholders are not accessible to all - only groups the government favours to invite - and the proceedings are often opaque and grossly unsatisfying. In contrast, more confrontational political actions that are undertaken openly, democratically and on the people's terms, outside of these platforms, often carry significant risk, with crippling political, legal and economic sanctions meted out [20, 21, 22, 23].

The government's intensification of authoritarian rule is most evident in these four areas: the state's increasing control on our right to free expression, assembly and procession; the government's control over and politicisation of public institutions - such as the media - that should be independent; the unfree and unfair nature of elections, and unequal access to public data.

## **1. Increasing state control over freedom of expression, assembly, and association.**

The people of Singapore have lost many of their civil rights and liberties. In the first few decades after it came to power, the PAP government used detention without trial via the Internal Security Act (ISA) which had the effect of silencing and deterring its critics and political opponents [9, 10, 11]. However, more recently the assaults on our democracy have become more sophisticated and insidious. It is manifest in the introduction of broad and vaguely worded laws that criminalise many forms of expression and assembly.

The 2009 amendment to the Public Order Act made it such that even a single person can be considered an illegal “assembly” or “procession” [3]. Moreover, section 298A of the Penal Code, which claims to criminalise those who promote “enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race” has been criticised for its use against speech and expression that highlights and challenges racism, instead of against acts of racism [12].

Examples of the PAP’s more recent assaults on our democratic society include legislation like FICA (Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act), POFMA (Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act), Online Criminal Harms Act, the 2023 amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act and the Presidential Elections Act, the 2024 proposed introduction of the MRHA (Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act), and the tightening of restrictions around pro-Palestine expression and numerous police investigations into pro-Palestine activism.

Many of the above-mentioned laws give the courts and Ministers alarming discretionary power to censor, punish and obstruct a wide range of critical expressions. These are particularly concerning in how they empower Ministers, rather than the courts, to be the final arbiters of the offence. The thresholds for what can be sanctioned are lower, and there are fewer checks and balances in place, including, in some cases, the severe curbing of the right to judicially review decisions.

These measures have intensified the culture of fear that pervades various spheres of ordinary life, such as the family and the workplace. Unsure if what they say may run foul of the law, many remain silent in the public sphere. To give one example, families living in poverty are often afraid to speak up about the inadequate welfare assistance, rejections or humiliating treatment they receive from the Social Service Office (SSO) because of fears that it would affect their prospects of receiving welfare assistance in the future, or that their family’s private and medical information will be published by the government by way of attempting to discredit their claims, as has been done before [18, 19].

The minefield of authoritarian laws also has a downstream effect on people’s right to associate with others. Workers in several sectors are subject to vague industry guidelines and conduct rules that forbid them from expressing views on-and-offline or sharing

content that may bring “disrepute” to their sector - which includes expressing dissenting political views deemed ‘controversial’, or associating with certain social or political causes. There are numerous instances of such guidelines weaponised to investigate or censure workers who are critical of certain state policies. Similarly, students have also been subject to investigations and censure when they speak up publicly on certain issues, or participate in some social justice organisations and campaigns. Citizens’ constitutional right to association and expression is undermined when employers and schools are allowed to intimidate, penalise and even expel workers and students for organising with others around issues they care about [22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29].

The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), a statutory board, also publishes legally-enforceable content guidelines that media platforms such as TV channels and radio stations need to adhere to. These guidelines contain content classification systems that discriminate against and censor LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media spaces [5, 16]. Such censorship restricts freedom of expression of and about groups that are marginalised, further reinforcing their stigmatisation.

## **2. State control over and politicisation of public institutions that should be independent.**

The mainstream media is largely state-owned and controlled [4], preventing it from being a reliable source of information. Many mainstream media newspaper articles simply reproduce the government’s press releases and do not include responses or views that detract from the government’s line, leading to distorted reports. Without a free media environment, the people are deprived of the ability to form informed opinions on important issues such as cost-of-living, drug policy, and race relations based on plural perspectives and diverse sources.

When current or former party colleagues of political office holders are appointed to key positions in national institutions - whether this be sovereign wealth funds or national media companies - there is a risk that these institutions are not perceived to be independent and this can damage public confidence.

Additionally, conflicts of interest and the lack of clear separation between Party and State need to be resolved in various other areas. This includes the dual roles of the Attorney-General’s Chambers, and the politicisation of Town Council management.

## **3. Unfair, unfree and unrepresentative elections.**

The Elections Department and Elections Boundaries Review Committee currently sit under the Prime Minister’s Office. Electoral boundaries are often seen to be drawn and redrawn

to benefit the incumbent party, and many have raised concerns about gerrymandering practices [13].

The Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system invented in 1988 does not allow citizens to vote for individual members of parliament, instead forcing them to vote for a group of candidates together, which often include an “anchor minister” that holds an important ministerial position - this dilutes voter power and manipulates electoral victories.

Citizens below the age of 21 are not eligible to vote despite many conscious young citizens having an interest in how the country runs. It is notable that citizens under the age of 21 are mandatorily conscripted into the army, where they bear arms, but yet they are not given the power to vote.

In the past, the ruling party has threatened to withdraw public services [7] and funding if they are not elected in a particular constituency [8], which is a form of voter intimidation.

#### **4. State monopoly of information**

For citizens to form learned opinions about key issues that affect our lives and country, we need to have the right to information. There are unjust barriers to gaining access to important data and statistics that government bodies collect using public monies, but withholds. Previous calls for freedom of information legislation and for further declassification of records have met with resistance from the government. Independent reporters struggle to get meaningful responses from government bodies when they ask questions. Even academics have to write in to the relevant authorities to request information, which is not always provided. Citizens are reduced to lobbying elected representatives to use their parliamentary privilege and limited time to ask Parliamentary Questions in an effort to get answers about important national matters that we are entitled to.

## Our Demands

*Restore our Rights to Free Expression, Assembly, and Association*

- 1. Abolish POFMA, FICA, the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA), and the Internal Security Act (ISA).**
- 2. Legalise peaceful public assemblies.**
  - a. Peaceful assemblies should not require permits from the police. Protestors should only need to notify the authorities of assemblies, as is the case in other jurisdictions, including Malaysia.
  - b. Amend the Public Order Act such that indoor events are no longer regulated under it.
- 3. Protect our right to freely and responsibly express political views, and join any political or civil society association**
  - a. Reassure all who live in Singapore, regardless of citizenship status, that they will not face reprisals from the state, prospective or current employers, schools and public services for sharing their frustrations with government programmes or schemes, expressing political dissent or joining civil society groups that criticise the government and its policies.
  - b. Stop the practice of blacklisting individuals [8] who are critical of the government and preventing them from gaining and retaining employment in the public sector, social service sector, academia and other sectors via oppressive “security checks”.
  - c. Remove guidelines in IMDA’s Art Entertainment code that prohibits content which “undermine public order, national security and/or stability” or go against “prevailing community standards of morality and decency” [17].
  - d. Take steps to reassure the public that decisions on state funding for any arts is independent of the political leaning of the work [17].
- 4. Remove discriminatory policies from IMDA’s legally-enforceable content guidelines.**
- 5. Stop using criminal defamation laws against independent journalists, such as in the cases of Roy Ngerng, Terry Xu and Ariffin Sha.**

*Implement Free, Fair, and Inclusive Elections*

- 6. Abolish the Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system.**
- 7. Remove the Elections Department and Electoral Boundaries Review Committee from the purview of the Prime Minister's Office and instead let them serve as independent institutions.**
- 8. Lower the voting age to 18 to allow younger Singaporeans to have a political voice.**
  - a. Many issues that the government is currently confronting, ranging from cost-of-living to climate change, greatly concern the futures of younger people, making their political voice incredibly important and relevant.

*Safeguard the Independence of National Institutions*

- 9. Reform The Newspapers and Printing Presses Act and The Broadcasting Act.**
  - a. Ensure that the government's power to require a class of management shares in newspaper and broadcasting companies is removed.
- 10. Establish an independent media regulatory body.**
  - a. Such a body would be empowered to investigate complaints against the media on grounds of ethics and journalistic integrity.
- 11. Separate the Attorney General's Chambers into two organisations - (1) Government Legal Advisor and (2) Public Prosecutions.**
  - a. Ensure these roles are kept independent of each other, preventing conflict of interest and confusion.
- 12. De-link Town Council management from any political party and keep it as a neutral depoliticised body.**
  - a. Return Town Council management to the Housing Development Board, as it was before 1988.

*Make Public & Historical Information Accessible and Transparent.*

- 13. Declassify all historical records that are more than 25 years old and make them freely accessible to all.**
- 14. Introduce a Freedom of Information Act.**

## Arresting the Rising Cost of Living

We are experiencing one of the worst cost of living crises in Singapore in recent memory. Singapore's average inflation rate of 4.4% between 2021 to 2023 was more than double the headline inflation of 1.8% over the past four decades [1]. There has also been a wave of price hikes from bus, train and taxi fares to utilities, electricity, postage rates, and hawker food. Most of these price hikes are a result of rich business owners raising prices to expand their surplus or profit margins, landlords jacking up rents or geopolitical factors. While many are struggling [2] to keep up with the surging cost of living, Singapore's billionaires have increased their wealth by almost a third [3]. Adding to these strains, the government increased the 7% GST to 8% in 2023 and 9% in 2024, further driving up the cost of living for all.

No one in Singapore should have to struggle to put food on the table or afford their basic needs so as to increase the wealth of already ultra-rich individuals and companies. To sufficiently reign in the rising cost of living, we need to urgently fix our social safety nets and reform our tax system. This will ensure that those who are reaping high profits from the rising cost of living pay their fair share of taxes that can then be redistributed fairly.

The exponential rise in the cost of living leads to a crisis of care, where unpaid care work becomes even more devalued, and pressures on every family member to earn income through the workforce intensifies. Caregivers' contribution to society should be valued for its indispensable lifesaving and life-nourishing role. Caregivers should not be forced into precarity or made to compromise on the care they provide at home to go out and work so as to keep up with the untenable rise in the costs of essential goods and services. Additionally, the government should ensure that the needs of children, the elderly, ill and disabled can be met through public assistance programmes that are rights-based, without overburdening families or relying on philanthropy and charity.

### **1. Precarity and Poverty: Our broken social safety nets**

Despite being an economy worth US\$ 2 trillion [4], over 20% of families in Singapore (around 280,000 households) live on less than \$2000 a month [5]. According to experts, as of a 2023 assessment, it takes anywhere between \$3,369-\$6,693 per month [6] for families to meet basic needs in Singapore, depending on family size.

Although we are a food-rich nation, 1 in 10 households go hungry at least once each year [7]. While we are forced to spend more to meet our needs due to high inflation and the GST hike, real wages have only increased by less than 2% [5, 8]. The government has acknowledged that the lower our incomes, the poorer our health [9].

With multiple economic crises in the last few decades, more of us live in fear of financial insecurity, which leads to much stress for ordinary families, fuelling social ills like racism,

xenophobia, low levels of social trust, toxic competitiveness and more. Life in Singapore is often compared to being in a pressure cooker - this pressure exacerbates mental health issues, suicide rates, interpersonal violence and more. More and more people fall into debt traps. Social protections are necessary to ease these pressures. When we fall, we rely on our social safety nets to catch us, but these nets are broken, and many people fall through them. When we face financial hardships, no amount of one-off cash-handouts such as GST or CDC vouchers are able to help us bounce back. Instead, we need stronger structural support to get back on our feet. Bold and principled reforms are needed to eradicate poverty altogether. It is obscene for poverty to exist amidst such abundance. We have the means to abolish poverty, we just need the will.

Since 2005, Social Service Offices have been set up to support low-income families with financial assistance. This assistance is drawn from the COMCARE endowment fund which (as of 2022) stands at SGD2.4 billion [15].

However, each year (with the exception of 2020) less than 10% of the annual fund amount is disbursed to households [15]. This is despite the fact that there are many complaints about the amounts families in need receive from COMCARE via the SSO. It is also common to hear accounts of applications taking 4-6 weeks (some even 2 months) to approve, and for families in desperate need to be turned away because they don't fit some criteria.

## **2. Growing Inequality: The Urgent Need for Tax Reforms**

In the past 15 years, while Singapore's wealth grew by 116%, the wealth gap increased by 23% [17], surpassing many in the region. According to UBS, Singapore's Gini Coefficient stands at 70 (100 meaning most unequal). Singapore has more than 333,000 millionaires, of which 30 have more than a billion in wealth [10, 11]. In stark contrast, 16.2% of the adult resident population (i.e. 792,000 people) have a net worth of less than \$13,500 [12]. If we take into account migrant workers, the gap widens further.

Research shows that significant economic inequality fuels gaps in education outcomes and social opportunity [13]. A recent survey showed that only 44% of university degree holders were hopeful of upward mobility in 10 years' time, with the figure falling to 40.6% for Singaporeans with vocational training or a polytechnic diploma, and only 23.8% for those with secondary school education or below – of the latter, over 10% think they would be worse off. [14]

To prioritise the majority of people's basic needs, the government must commit to bold tax reforms. We need an economy where the majority of ordinary people are not subsidising the greed of the richest, but rather, the needs of the people are taken care of by taxing the richest. This tax revenue should be channelled towards social spending.

## Our Demands

### *Poverty and Precarity: Fixing our Social Safety Nets*

#### **1. Provide adequate structural support for the poor (COMCARE)**

- a. Increase the quantum disbursed per applicant based on evidence-based minimum income standards [6], extending the minimum duration of short-to-medium assistance (there is currently no minimum, but an average of 3 months) to 6 months, and decrease the waiting time to approve applications.
- b. The criteria for qualification for financial assistance must be reviewed from a rights-based lens to ensure that the diverse needs of individual family members are met and the unique circumstances of each family doesn't lead to any discrimination against them.
- c. The provision of aid to an applicant should be delinked from their ability to gain employment, as well as from the income of other family members, which they may not be able to benefit from.

#### **2. Expand child and dependent care services**

- a. Maternity and paternity leave should be equalised, and parental leave should make no distinction between local and immigrant parents.
- b. Paid care leave for dependents other than children should be legislated.
- c. Mothers' employment should be delinked from child care subsidy eligibility, and childcare should be made free for low-income families.
- d. Nighttime childcare services should be expanded.
- e. Community-based childminders should be trained and licensed so as to provide flexible childcare / babysitting services.
- f. Caregiver payments should be introduced for those who stay at home full-time to take care of dependents.
- g. The statutory right to request flexible work arrangements should be introduced.

#### **3. Ensure milk security**

- a. No one should have to scrimp, scrape or steal in order to feed their children adequate milk.

- b. Given that not all mothers are capable of breastfeeding, and all carers are not biological mothers of the child they're caring for, the government should do more to make milk formula affordable for all.
- c. Instead of relying on the unreliable supply of milk assistance on a case-by-case basis from family service centres and charities, the government should allow for the funds in every child's Child Development Account (CDA) to be used to purchase milk formula.
- d. All government financial relief schemes (e.g. CDC vouchers) should not exclude milk formula as items that can be purchased, and extend these vouchers to help all households with children in Singapore regardless of nationality.
- e. As different children have different needs when it comes to milk formula, the government must do more, such as using the Price Control Act, to regulate the price of all types of milk formula to ensure that parents of children with special requirements or allergies are not penalised by having to pay exorbitant prices to feed their children.

**4. Nationalise debt relief and increase scrutiny over predatory lending**

- a. Debt relief programmes should be nationalised, rather than offered by charities.
- b. The practice of employers offering predatory lending schemes to their workers should be banned.
- c. Interest on hire-purchase loans should be regulated to prevent predatory lending, which pushes vulnerable families into heavy debt and keeps them trapped.
- d. Consumers who are deceived into taking high-interest loans should have access to reparations and redressal mechanisms.
- e. Harassment by debt-collectors, whether licensed or not, should be banned.

**5. Introduce policy measures that increase the availability of affordable, culturally appropriate and healthy food in the heartlands**

- a. All residential estates should have affordable halal, vegetarian and healthy meals within walking distances.
- o Policies that support hawkers and hawker centres to thrive while keeping food affordable should be introduced. Hawkers should be provided grants, rental subsidies and other forms of support such that hawkering is

re-established as a viable, dignified and attractive livelihood in today's times.

- Fresh food stalls (wet markets), minimarts, supermarkets, mama shops and grocery stores in the heartlands should be provided the support they need to keep food affordable, and regulated to ensure that unreasonable price hikes don't occur.

### *Redistributing Wealth, Reducing Inequality*

#### **1. Impose a 2% wealth tax on the richest 1% in Singapore**

- a. The wealthiest passive income earners should not be excused from contributing to government reserves. The implementation of a progressive wealth tax for the richest 1% of Singapore can boost government revenue to the benefit of all Singapore residents.

#### **2. Reintroduce Estate Duty (i.e. Inheritance Tax)**

- a. "Estate duty", which refers to the tax on the total market value of a person's assets (cash and non-cash) at the date of their death, was removed in 2008 [16].
- b. Singapore's former Estate Duty taxed 5% of market value after exemptions such as final expenses and funeral costs.
- c. Estate Duty should be reintroduced to disrupt excessive intergenerational wealth accumulation, and be used for wealth redistribution.

#### **3. Reverse the increase of Goods and Services Tax (GST)**

- a. Regressive taxation like the GST disproportionately affects working-class consumers, making necessities like food, milk, and toiletries unfairly expensive to poorer residents.
- b. The GST hike to 9% is taking a toll on low-wage workers and lower-income families. This strain is not sufficiently mitigated by rebate vouchers. The GST should be brought back down to 7% (what it was before the increases in 2023 and 2024), and frozen at this rate for at least the next decade.
- c. The introduction and enhancement of wealth taxes and estate duty tax as outlined above will effectively replace or even exceed any revenue from raising the GST.

**4. Commit to using tax revenue raised from the above measures in a redistributive manner and for social investment**

- a. The government must commit to using the tax revenue collected through aforementioned means (i.e. Wealth Tax, Estate Duty) on social spending for the poorest and most vulnerable in Singapore. This includes, but is not limited to areas of education, healthcare, and welfare support.
- b. Progressive taxation serves as a fairer alternative to the government's current direction of increasing regressive taxation, and will mitigate the growing inequality that is fracturing our society.

## An Economy that Works for Workers

Labour policy should ensure that all workers and their families have the opportunity to thrive in Singapore, have safe and decent working conditions, and are equitably compensated for the wealth they generate for the country.

Singapore's impressive US\$2 trillion economy is only possible because of the many local and non-local workers who labour day and night in this city. However, despite their hard work, Singapore workers' quality of life has been on the decline. Workers' share of the country's wealth has decreased over the years [1]. Real wages have not kept up with the skyrocketing cost of living [2]. Workers here also work some of the longest hours in the world [3], sacrificing rest, health and time they could have spent with their loved ones, which allows their employers to accumulate more wealth. Employers overworking their staff, under-staffing the workplace and bypassing safety measures have also fed the alarming rate of workplace injuries, fatalities and occupational health concerns.

A huge portion of the workforce are migrants, who are subject to degrading working and living conditions that amount to modern day slavery. They are also deprived of most civil and political rights. Due to weak whistleblower protections and labour laws (in particular, union laws), many workers, local and migrant, do not feel safe to surface abuse and other problems at work.

Overall, the rights of workers have been eroded over the decades, and the gains of the labour movement of the 50s and 60s have been clawed back slowly but surely. These need to be reinstated and updated to reflect the needs of modern workers.

### **1. Weak wage policy had led to workers' declining share of the country's wealth**

In 2019, workers only received 40 cents for every dollar generated in the country, a 2 cent decrease from their share in 2014 [4]. This means that in contrast, capital's share of wealth has increased from 58 cents to 60 cents per dollar generated. While workers' incomes may have increased in absolute terms, this is no match for the rising costs. 40% of Singaporeans' incomes are not keeping up with inflation [5]. For young workers and students soon to enter the workforce, the rising cost of living ranks as the top concern for their mental health [7]. Without cost-of-living adjustments to wages, workers face increasing insecurity and feel like they have no choice but to work more, take on side hustles or forgo a decent standard of living. This is unsustainable and unjust.

### **2. Weak protections against overwork and health hazards**

Since the economy re-opened after Covid-19 in 2021, workplace injuries and occupational diseases have been on the rise. Workplace injuries rose by over 2% from 34,952 in 2021 to 35,726 in 2023 [7]. Occupational diseases rose by an alarming rate of 86% from 659 in 2021 to 1229 in 2023. Workplace fatalities rose from 2021 to 2022 but fortunately went down in 2023. In 2022, there was an increase in the rate of workplace fatalities, from 1.1 fatalities per 100,000 workers in 2021 to 1.3 fatalities per 100,000 workers. 46 workers died in 2022 an increase from 37 in 2021. In 2023, the number of workers' deaths went down slightly to 36 workers and fatality rates were down to 0.99 fatalities per 100,000 workers [7].

While comprehensive, such statistics still do not paint the full picture of the state of how unsafe workplaces are in Singapore. Domestic workers and gig workers in sectors such as food delivery and private hire transport and warehouse packing are not accounted for in these numbers. Domestic workers live in the same households as their employers. There have been several cases of domestic workers being victims of sexual assault [16], physical and verbal violence [17], and forced starvation. While some of these fatalities are reported in the media, there are no national statistics. In a poll done in 2022, it was reported that 1 in 3 food delivery riders had been in at least one accident that required medical attention [18]. Similar to construction workers, food delivery riders also share the risk of suffering from heat-related illnesses due to working outdoors [19]. With the rise in online shopping, more people have been employed on an ad-hoc basis to do manual work in industrial warehouses. Because many of them do not have formal contracts, it is unclear if accidents at these warehouses are even reported.

Workers' health and lives are put at risk due to poor workplace safety practices and unreasonable rules. Weak labour laws allow employers to overwork their workers and under-staff the workplace, with impunity. Singapore is the fourth most overworked city in the world and the most overworked in the APAC region with workers working an average of 45 hours a week [3]. Overwork plagues both blue and white-collared workers. Most low-wage migrant workers in essential jobs are not given mandatory rest days per week. Bus drivers have also raised issues with long and tiring shifts, with cases of inadequate sleep leading to accidents injuring both driver and passengers [8]. It is also not uncommon to hear of office workers who work overnight to meet deadlines.

### **3. Weak whistleblower protections and labour unions**

Many workers who are abused in Singapore fear speaking up because they can be punished or terminated by their employer, and left without recourse. Although workers can legally join an existing union or form one if it does not currently exist to seek redressal, many workers feel cynical about unions protecting their interests. This is because NTUC (National Trade Union Congress), the umbrella body representing more than 90% of unions in the country is led by members of the ruling party and government

[13], and NTUC's tripartite system may be seen by many to disadvantage workers' interests as two of the three tripartite partners are non-workers [10]. Only a handful of unions are independent of government control, and the process of registering independent unions remains onerous and obfuscated.

#### **4. Leaving behind disadvantaged sections of the working class**

The one million low-wage migrant workers in Singapore build this city, keep it clean, and look after our children, but they have been stripped of their access to government subsidised healthcare services since 2008 [11]. They are not covered under the Progressive Wage Model, and are excluded from most labour unions. These workers do not receive any support measures the government usually provides for cost-of-living adjustments or GST increases. Many of these migrant workers pay income tax, and all pay GST, but they have no rights in return. They do not have the right to freely transfer employers on their own, and can be deported by their employers overnight, turning their lives upside down without warning. Low-wage migrant workers are, without a doubt, the most disenfranchised group of workers in the country.

Ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ+ workers, people with disabilities, and workers raised in poverty also face considerable barriers to earning a living and a place in society, compared to others. For example, holding down a job for a full month before getting paid requires multiple expenses for travel, food, work-appropriate clothing, etc that the poor cannot afford, forcing them to turn to cash-in-hand jobs that come with no protections or stability. Workers who are ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, or who have stigmatised health conditions may face discrimination during the hiring process and at work, workplace bullying, unfair dismissal, and face hurdles in career progression [20]. These barriers often go unrecognised, and there are no effective measures in place to mitigate them.

In a country with so much wealth, and where the government has the infrastructure in place to strictly regulate businesses, enforce better standards of employment, and prevent and respond to abuse of workers, it is completely practical to implement the necessary policies to protect the basic needs of all workers from employers' greed. Weak and exclusionary policies relating to wages, safety, rest, and unions must be urgently replaced with strong policies that put workers first, and ensure that all workers are equally protected and uplifted.

## Our Demands

### *Reform Wage Policy*

#### **1. Implement a universal minimum wage that reflects decent living standards.**

- a. Singapore needs a nation-wide minimum wage to ensure that all workers can afford a decent standard of living. Singapore's current Progressive Wage Model (PWM) mandates differentiated minimum monthly wages only in certain specified economic sectors – this excludes Singapore's lowest paid workers - low-wage migrant workers who work in sectors such as construction, marine, services, and domestic work.
- b. The minimum wage should be based on evidence-based standards of the income necessary for survival and social inclusion [12]. The principle of a minimum wage should be adapted according to the different modes of employment of different workers (e.g. minimum fare guarantee for delivery riders).
- c. The minimum wage amount must be reviewed regularly to keep up with the inflation rate, with adjustments for cost of living.

### *Safety and Rest for All Workers*

#### **2. Recognise all workers under the relevant sections of the Employment Act**

- a. The Employment Act (EA) itself is grossly outdated, and needs to be significantly reformed to adapt to the evolving nature and intensity of work since the Act's creation in 1968.
- b. As the main labour legislation, it is imperative that all workers' basic rights are protected by being included in the EA.
- c. It is therefore appalling that the basic employment legislation in this country does not include over 88,000 platform workers and almost 300,000 migrant domestic workers.
- d. Freelance cultural workers (e.g. artists, painters, musicians, writers, animators) who are vulnerable to the onslaught of long working hours and unsafe work practices (e.g. working from heights) are not currently protected by any specific legislation. Protections for them under the EA should also be further explored.

#### **3. Strengthen protections around rest and safe working conditions**

- a. According to the World Health Organisation, long working hours kill 745,000 people a year [13]. As the fourth most overworked city in the world, we need stronger laws to protect all workers from the perils of overwork and unsafe working conditions.
- b. The EA was created in a context where the proportion of blue-collar workers to white-collar workers was much higher, and did not account for overtime for white-collar workers.
- c. With the current epidemic of professionals working 70-100 hour work weeks [3, 14], it is high time that white-collar workers' entitlement to overtime pay is legislated.
- d. Given the expansion of the service sector, the EA should include provisions to protect service workers from standing for inhumanely long hours on the job without sufficient breaks or chairs.
- e. All workers deserve the right to safe transportation, and to this end, the transport of workers on the backs of cargo lorries should be banned without further delay. In the broader vision of road safety for all, LTA should make a commitment to Vision Zero, where zero traffic fatalities are accepted in our transportation system. In 2023, someone died on our roads every 2.7 days. Introduced in Sweden in the 1990s, Vision Zero is currently practiced in Jurong Island, and should be extended to the transportation network to protect migrant workers and Singaporeans everywhere.
- f. Stronger entitlements to a minimum number of paid sick leave days should be legislated, without the requirement of producing a Medical Certificate if the leave is for 1-2 days.
- g. The maximum number of hours workers are allowed to work under the Employment Act is currently 72 hours, and needs to be reduced with the view to align with World Health Organisation's warning that working 55 hours or more per week is a serious hazard to workers' physical and mental health.
- h. Stronger action must be taken against employers who overwork their staff, as well as employers who rob workers of the overtime wages they are legally entitled to.

*Leave No Worker Behind*

- 4. Treat all workers regardless of gender, age, race, nationality, disability status, HIV status, and sexual orientation equally.**

- a. No worker should be discriminated against based on their identity. This includes how workers are paid, hired, promoted or dismissed, and treated at the workplace.
- b. We need strong anti-discrimination legislation that pertains to all stages of a worker's employment, and includes protection against discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation, which is glaringly omitted in the new Workplace Fairness Legislation that is meant to be passed in the second half of 2024.

**5. Introduce unemployment insurance and re-employment support for more vulnerable workers.**

- a. No worker should be left stranded if they are terminated by their employer. Since the pandemic, workers from various sectors have experienced an increased rate of lay-offs.
- b. These lay-offs can be very sudden and disruptive to workers and their families. The disruptive nature of such events also hinder the worker from stabilising herself to find another job.
- c. To minimise financial instability, workers from all sectors should have the right to unemployment insurance. This will empower workers to navigate the job-market on fairer terms and have a smoother transition to their next job.
- d. Workers from lower-income backgrounds who are newly starting or returning to formal employment should receive some state support to sustain themselves during their first month of work, before payday. The lack of adequate support in this critical period discourages poorer people with inadequate financial resources from seeking formal, full-time employment which could offer them a route to stability, and widen the net of jobs they could be eligible for in the future.

*Strengthening Workers' Voice and Power*

**6. Reform the Trade Union Act to restore the independence of workers' unions and empower them to truly represent the interests of workers.**

- a. It should be made as easy as possible for workers to form independent unions that their employers are legally obliged to recognise. This will enable

workers to engage in collective bargaining and represent themselves in any disputes with their employers.

- b. The Trade Union Act should be reviewed to accord unions greater independence and power to truly represent workers' interests.
- c. In addition, civil society groups should not be criminalised for engaging in "trade union activity" [15], a vaguely-worded phrase that can easily be abused to mean anything that promotes workers' rights and well-being.

## Housing: Shelter, not commodity

Everyone who calls Singapore home should have a right to safe, stable, and affordable housing, which is becoming increasingly out of reach [1], and pushing residents into unconscionable debt. Our public housing system should cater to all long-term residents, regardless of marital status, race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, or citizenship. Those who are unhoused need much more comprehensive and accessible support. The construction of public housing should not require the exploitation of migrant labour, and migrant workers should be guaranteed decent accommodation, where they are free from surveillance and movement restrictions.

### **1. Unaffordable Housing**

One significant reason why housing has become unaffordable is that reselling one's HDB flat has occupied the role of retirement financing in the absence of a nationalised pension scheme that provides retirement income at sufficient replacement rates going by established international benchmarks [2]. As such, public housing flats are priced as assets at rates that outpace inflation to guarantee resale profits that correspond with retirement needs. This creates an inherent contradiction, such that public housing is treated as a commodity sold to accrue private profit, not as a public good. Publicly-funded housing grants are far from enough to mitigate the rapidly increasing prices of resale HDB flats.

Secondly, high land cost often makes up the lion's share (about 60%) of development costs for Built-to-Order housing [3]. However, how the government arrives at this land price is frustratingly opaque [4]. As opposition party members have previously pointed out in Parliament [5], if land prices are indirectly derived from the resale market, the effects of a bubble, in which housing prices increase unsustainably due to speculation, can be further embedded and exacerbated in BTO prices over time.

If the land cost of roads and other infrastructure can be heavily discounted, given the public value they provide, land that is utilised for public housing should also be recognised as a public good. The positive effects of housing the population spill over into society when people experience safety and stability as a result of being able to access affordable housing.

### **2. Inaccessible Housing**

The Singapore government often touts a high rate of home ownership as a result of sound policies in the public housing system. However, this obscures the fact that the regulations

surrounding access to housing systemically exclude vulnerable members of the community, notably non-citizen single parents of Singaporean / PR children, unwed singles below the age of 35 (which include LGBTQ+ couples, since same-sex marriage is illegal in Singapore) and single parents below the age of 21 [6].

These systemic exclusions penalise citizens and non-citizens alike who deviate from the nuclear, ‘intact’, middle-to-higher income, heteronormative Singaporean family unit that government policies privilege. Many individuals who fall through the gaps of this system are forced to stay in abusive or unstable situations, pay exorbitant prices for private rental accommodation or face homelessness.

Ethnic minorities are also disadvantaged in their pursuit to own a home in the resale market. The HDB’s Ethnic Integration Policy (EIP) requires one to only be able to purchase a flat from a member of the same race [35], unless the racial quota in that block or neighbourhood has already been reached. What this means in effect, is that Chinese home-buyers have about 70% of sellers to buy a flat from while Malays have about 14% and Indians 9%, making it much more challenging for ethnic minorities to buy a home. This also significantly limits the choice ethnic minorities have as to which neighbourhood they can live in.

The government purports that the EIP exists to promote racial integration and prevent the formation of racial enclaves [35]. However, given the country’s racial demographic, the EIP only prevents the clustering of ethnic minority households while cementing the clustering of Chinese households, ensuring that all neighbourhoods have a majority of Chinese households. The EIP is therefore discriminatory against ethnic minorities. While individuals can file an appeal against the EIP, most appeals have not been successful. In 2022, it was reported that 66% of appeals against the EIP failed [36].

Furthermore, public rental housing, which is meant to provide the most affordable housing to low-income families, is still out of reach for many in need of housing due to strict eligibility rules [6]. The Public Rental Scheme’s stringent eligibility criteria means that applications by single, unmarried parents who are not widowed or divorced, non-citizen parents, and divorced parents with shared custody are subject to approval by HDB according to what it deems as “in the best interest of” applicants’ children [6]. Income caps required for rental housing are also very low, and are set on a household basis. This puts those who earn higher than the income cap for rental housing but who cannot afford to buy a flat in a fix.

Families seeking public rental housing are subjected to long wait times [7]. Tenancy is also provided for too brief a period - two years at a time - after which renewal applications need to be made. Moreover, it was recorded that in 2022, of the vacant rental flats available to new applicants, 2 out of 3 flats needed to be spruced up before

residents could access them [31]. The lack of resources allocated to ensure a smooth turnaround between tenants drove this backlog, which contributes to the under-supply of rental flats. This reflects how underserved this segment of residents are in the government's ecosystem of housing policies.

Interim Rental Housing (IRH), which is provided to families that need shelter during transitional periods, is also provided for unreasonably short periods of time, with tedious tenancy renewal processes. This scheme can also put families in unsafe situations as they are forced to share the small flat with other families who are unknown to them [34].

Rental housing neighbourhoods face many issues such as cramped living conditions, unsanitary common spaces, heavy policing and poor social environments. These can make it very challenging for residents, especially children, to thrive in [34].

### **3. Exploitative labour practices in the construction of public housing**

Currently, in order to keep construction costs low, the government provides building contracts to private construction companies via a bidding system. Bidding drives contractors to keep costs unsustainably low in order to remain competitive, sometimes reducing costs below the actual cost of inputs [8].

The main area where contractors can make cuts to costs below the actual value of the input is in labour, which is where most exploitation of migrant labour occurs. This results in many dehumanising conditions that migrant workers are subject to, such as rampant wage theft, overwork, inedible food, and unsafe working conditions.

### **4. The plight of unhoused people**

COVID-19 saw a large spike in the number of unhoused individuals due to many destabilising social factors such as a higher rate of unemployment and rapid growth in inflation [9, 10, 11]. The most recently published count of unhoused individuals (2020) found that there are roughly 1,000 unhoused individuals in Singapore, excluding unhoused individuals who are being provided shelter in temporary, crisis, or transitional accommodation [10].

Insufficient research, data and policy attention to unhoused people is a symptom of the authorities' preference to obscure the reality that houselessness exists in Singapore.

The closest legislation related to houselessness is the Destitute Persons Act (DPA), which defines a "destitute person" as one who is found panhandling in a public place which

causes annoyance to others, or an idle person who has no visible means of subsistence or residence - this defines unhoused people not as a category that need rights and protection, but as a problem to be policed or ridded [12].

The DPA requires that if an unhoused person is encountered by the police, they are forcefully institutionalised and not allowed to decide when to leave, facing a process akin to carceral detention. This involuntary admission deters unhoused people from seeking help and pushes them further into the shadows. The DPA also imposes a fine of \$3,000 and imprisonment to destitute persons who are found to be "habitual beggars", which stigmatises and entrenches vulnerable individuals into a cycle of debt, poverty, and imprisonment.

Unhoused people are some of the most vulnerable members of our society, and require long-term assistance to find stable housing, instead of policies aimed primarily at keeping them off the streets in an effort to reduce their visibility.

## **5. Substandard housing conditions of migrant workers**

Foreign workers comprise nearly 40% [13] of Singapore's labour force, of which nearly 50% are either Work Permit (WP) holders who are Construction, Marine shipyard and Process Workers (CMPW) or Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs). The terms of their employment dictate that their accommodation, to a large extent, is the responsibility of their employers. There are major deficiencies in the living standards of how both groups of migrant workers are housed.

Over the years, migrant workers and migrant worker Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have reported many cases of substandard living conditions in workers' dormitories. These include extremely hot and cramped rooms housing up to 16 workers at a time [14] with little to no ventilation or cooling beyond small fans [15], a lack of cooking facilities for workers to prepare their own meals [16], a lack of laundry facilities [17], little to no recreational facilities, unhygienic standards [18], inadequate and insufficient toilets and showers [19], and frequent insect or vermin infestations [20].

Workers housed in Factory-Converted Dormitories, Construction Temporary Quarters, and Workers' Quarters at Farms have also reported additional safety hazards, with broken fixtures and windows, as well as a lack of separation between working areas and living quarters, such that workers have to try and sleep in noisy, dusty and unsafe conditions [21]. Separately, zoning policies intentionally allocate land for these dormitories far away from residential and commercial areas, a strategy aimed at hiding the migrant worker population from sight, and reinforcing the stigmatisation of migrant workers [22]. Migrant workers pay the price for this in terms of long travel and wait times for vehicles, high public transport fares and restrictions in their mobility.

Dormitory rules are also very restrictive and undermine the autonomy, safety, and dignity of migrant workers. They are subjected to strict curfews by dorm operators, and prohibited from consuming alcohol within dormitory premises. If they transgress these infantilising rules, they are reported to their employers and punished.

MDWs, on the other hand, are mandated to live with their employers [23]. The law says they have to be provided “acceptable accommodation”, [24] while a circular directive of what this means in practice can be found on the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) website. For example, it says that “you should provide your MDW with a separate room. If that is not possible, you must ensure that her accommodation has adequate space and privacy,” and yet, MDWs are often housed in cramped spaces without privacy [25, 32]. However, due to lack of enforcement, many MDWs continue to suffer inadequate and abusive living conditions in their employers’ homes, which compromise their privacy, safety, autonomy, and comfort [33]. As such, while MOM has set up guidelines, the enforcement of these guidelines needs to be strengthened to protect the wellbeing of our MDWs.

## Our demands

### *Meeting Residents' Needs: Housing Affordability and Availability*

#### **1. Negate the large burden of land cost in the price of HDB flats.**

- a. Establish Non-Open Market flats which don't include land cost and which can be sold back to the government at its present valuation during the time of sale.
- b. If the owner chooses to sell their properties for a profit as Open-Market flats, then they can be required to pay the land cost (at present valuation).

#### **2. Price land set aside for public housing as a public good.**

- a. The valuation of land dedicated to public housing should take into consideration the median wage, cost of living, and economic conditions which measure the means of residents at any period of time, instead of relying purely on existing market conditions and inflationary effects.
- b. Land dedicated to housing should also be priced lower than other uses of land because of the positive externalities associated with public housing that are often not priced in the market.

#### **3. Put in place policies to ensure retirement adequacy so that residents do not depend on selling their homes in order to retire comfortably.**

- a. The "Retirement Adequacy" section of this Manifesto elaborates on these policies.
- b. This will shift residents' view from seeing their flat as an asset to profit from, towards seeing it as a basic good that meets their need for shelter.

#### **4. Provide security of tenure by implementing affordable lease renewal policies.**

- a. Currently, HDB flat owners have no security of tenure beyond 99 years, and the capital values of their flats will sharply diminish towards the end of the 99-year lease.
- b. As such, a sum of public funds should be reinvested into public housing every year to ensure that lease depreciation does not eventually deplete the value of homes.
- c. This can come in the form of maintenance, grants, and further increases in the supply of new flats to replace old ones.

#### **5. Provide adequate housing relief during times of crisis**

- a. Especially in times of crisis, no one should have to worry about becoming houseless, or choose between paying for rent/mortgage and other necessities like food.
- b. During times of crisis (e.g. Covid-19 pandemic), rental relief should be provided for those living in public housing.
- c. The rental waivers provided for commercial tenants should be extended to private residential tenants too.
- d. Mortgage payments should be lowered or frozen for the duration of the crisis.

*Access to Housing for All*

**6. Allow all Singaporeans, Permanent Residents and Long-Term Resident Parents with Singaporean / PR children to be able to buy or rent public housing under HDB.**

- a. Our understanding of Long-Term residents should include those on Long-Term Visit Passes, Employment Passes, Work Permits, etc.
- b. This would ensure that LGBTQ+ individuals and couples, non-citizen single parents of Singaporean / PR children, unwed singles below the age of 35, and single parents below the age of 21 can access public housing without having to resort to private rental.

**7. Abolish the Ethnic Integration Policy**

- a. Access to housing in the resale market should not depend on the government approving an appeal.
- b. The government should look into other means of addressing the purported issues the EIP sought to address without discrimination and added burdens on ethnic minorities

**8. Increase the income cap for rental housing.**

- a. This will ensure that more people who cannot afford to buy a house are able to access public rental housing.
- b. This also removes disincentives from working, seeking higher-paying employment, and other efforts by a household to improve their financial situation.

**9. Improve the accessibility of rental housing for single parents.**

- a. Exempt all single parents from the debarment rule for rental housing to reduce situations of insecure and inadequate housing and impoverishment.
- b. Provide adequate housing grants for single parents.
- c. Exempt single parents from the resale levy.
- d. Allow divorced couples to sell their flat without meeting the Minimum Occupancy Period (MOP) of five years if there is a court order to sell the flat, as the imposed penalty can cause financial difficulty.
- e. Allow single parents to start queuing for the application of housing as soon as they get the interim judgement of divorce, to ensure that they can access stable housing in the shortest time possible.
- f. Take into consideration the applicant's family relationships when suggesting living with family as a housing option, to prevent strain on family relations.
- g. Lengthen the tenancy periods of rental housing and Interim Rental Housing for as long as is necessary for single parents and children to find stable housing without the threat of eviction.

**10. Shorten waiting times for rental housing applicants who are unhoused or at risk of being houseless.**

**11. Improve the conditions of rental housing.**

- a. Currently, only one and two-room rental flats are available, which are insufficient in size for larger households. Three and four-room rental flats should also be made available under the Public Rental Scheme.
- b. Reduce policing in rental flat neighbourhoods and ensure that Town Councils extend the necessary resources to rental flat neighbourhoods to ensure that they are clean, well-maintained and well-resourced with playgrounds and other amenities.

**12. Support the housing needs of children and family members of incarcerated persons.**

- a. When one's family member or parent is incarcerated, they face various significant consequences, including but not limited to housing instability.
- b. Provide interim housing options for these families during this transitional period as they adjust to the loss of a caregiver or breadwinner, emotional distress, stigma and more. [37].

- c. Centre the rights of children to have stable, safe and dignified housing when considering sentencing options for caregivers.
  - i. Children who are without a caregiver during the period of their family member's incarceration tend to be passed around from family to family, which is destabilising and disruptive to the lives of these children.

*Reducing Profiteering in Housing Construction*

**13. Place the construction of public housing under a state-owned construction workforce**

- a. Private construction companies have some of the highest business risks, and relatively small profit margins [8].
- b. The bidding system should be removed, as it introduces unnecessary competition and lowers the price of contracts below a sustainable level.

**14. Tie the price of construction to cost fundamentals, instead of relying on the open market.**

- a. This is a safer and more just alternative to the bidding system, and also ensures that housing bubbles are less likely to be embedded in the valuation of building cost.

*Acknowledging, Decriminalising, and Addressing Houselessness*

**15. Decriminalise houselessness.**

**16. Have public agencies undertake an accurate and regular street count of unhoused individuals every year.**

- a. This will provide the necessary information to guide public policy and the planning of services directed towards supporting unhoused individuals.

**17. Improve outreach services to better connect houseless individuals to housing support.**

- a. This should be done by introducing publicly funded services and extending the mandate of existing mainstream welfare organisations like the Family Service Centres and Social Service Offices.

**18. Lower entry requirements to overnight shelter services and ensure immediate availability of shelter and access to social services.**

- a. The current practice of shelter services which impose a short, arbitrary duration of stay are inadequate and insufficient to meet the needs of unhoused individuals.
- b. These services should be designed to address the underlying problems faced by unhoused individuals related to income, health, work and social relationships.
- c. All unhoused people, regardless of residential status, should be eligible for emergency shelter and social services.

**19. Guarantee rental flat housing and unconditional financial assistance for unhoused individuals.**

- a. Welfare systems such as ComCare and ComLink allow for many unhoused individuals to fall through the cracks because of requirements to house all members of a family together and evaluate needs based on collective household income.
- b. Instead, the material reality of unhoused individuals should be evaluated independent of other family members, such that they are guaranteed rental flat housing for as long as it may take individuals to find employment, seek medical care or receive the support they require for the problems that led to their predicament.
- c. Unconditional cash transfers in the form of minimum income guarantees should be provided in regular and sufficient amounts during this recovery period, in line with the vast number of studies which show that such transfers are the most stabilising, efficient and cost-effective public policy to combat homelessness. [26, 27, 28]

*Dignified, Safe, and Locationally Accessible Accommodation for Migrant Workers*

**20. Include a list of migrant worker NGOs in materials that the government publishes about and/or for migrant workers**

- a. This should include NGOs like Migrant Workers Singapore (MWS), Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2).

- b. Sharing information about these NGOs can raise migrant workers' awareness of the organisations that they can reach out to for the support and resources they need, including housing grievances.

*For Construction, Marine shipyard and Process Workers (CMPW):*

**21. Specify safe and dignified standards of accommodation based on requirements decided by migrant workers who reside in dormitories.**

- a. Create an occupancy cap correlated with the square footage of dormitory rooms on par with HDB's specifications [29].
- b. Legislate and enforce sufficient ventilation and cooling.
- c. Require sufficient and adequate cooking, laundry, and sanitary facilities.
- d. Legislate and enforce hygiene standards within dormitories, such as regular fumigation, pest control and cleaning, which should not fall on dormitory residents to perform.

**22. Remove zoning restrictions about where migrant worker dormitories can be built.**

- a. If dormitories are still far from worksites and social areas, ensure that employers pay for safe, regular, and free transport to and from dormitories in the form of shuttle buses, ez-link card top-ups, or transport vans.

**23. Ensure that workers have freedom of movement.**

- a. Allow workers to freely leave and enter their living premises without surveillance.
- b. Stop employers and dormitory operators from restricting workers' movements through punishment or threat of termination/repatriation.
- c. Prohibit dormitories from imposing restrictions on alcohol consumption.

*For Migrant Domestic Workers:*

**24. Strengthen the enforcement of the list of requirements for acceptable accommodation stated on the MOM website and as mandated by the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act for migrant domestic workers.**

- a. Accommodation should provide shelter from the elements, be safe, comfortable, and protect the privacy of domestic workers.
- b. Decent accommodation standards should be enforced through regular household visits by MOM officers, periodic interviews with domestic workers, and post-placement checks by employment agencies.

**25. Grant live-out options to migrant domestic workers (MDWs).**

- a. MDWs should have the option to live outside their employers' home, which would give them more privacy and autonomy, the ability to separate work and home, and regulate their working hours more clearly.
- b. Allowing MDWs to live out will give employers and MDWs a chance to choose a living and working environment that best suits them.
- c. Employers and MDWs can agree on a salary that will cover the MDW's accommodation, transport and food needs, as well as her working hours.

## Ensuring Retirement Adequacy

The right to retire means that one should be able to stop working at a reasonable age and still be able to continue meeting their needs independently (i.e. without reliance on family members or charities), and without too significant a drop in their standard of living. Our late years are a time when most of us become more frail, and we should be entitled to rest, living out the rest of our lives peacefully and with dignity. Our older people should not have to hustle, collect cardboard or engage in rag-picking for a pittance, clear plates at coffee shops, or panhandle on the streets.

The government's focus on contributory pensions and stringent, means-tested welfare for older persons leaves a significant number of people in Singapore unable to afford retirement as income replacement rates are inadequate [1]. This affects especially the very old who did not have significant educational opportunities in the early years, and have not had the chance to accumulate sufficient funds in their Central Provident Fund (CPF).

The inequalities produced by gendered expectations also manifest in the retirement struggles of women. The responsibility of care work tends to fall on the women – mothers are entitled to 16 weeks of Government-Paid Maternity Leave, compared to fathers who are only entitled to 4 weeks, from 2024 [15, 16]. Such policies reinforce the prevalence of maternity discrimination at the workplace, where childbirth is more likely to disrupt the pregnant/birthing parent's career [17]. In ensuring retirement adequacy for people of all genders, the government must also address the effects of gender-based discrimination that affects people throughout their life course.

With the rising cost of living, many younger workers too are nervous that they will never be able to stop working. Retirement is increasingly becoming a privilege of the wealthy, rather than the right of all. Singapore's retirement policies must be reformed to ensure that older persons can experience financial security regardless of the income they earned and saved during their working years.

### **1. A high number of older persons in the workforce out of necessity**

A large number of older persons are in employment in Singapore, at 31% employment rate for age 65 or above. 7 out of 10 of these older persons in employment make less than \$2,500 [2]. An estimated 11.9% of this age group earn less than \$1,500 a month [2]. There is also a high prevalence of elderly working in traditionally low-wage sectors, such as land transport and supporting services (54%) and food and beverage services (42%) [3]. These sectors also see a significant amount of part-time employment, which makes earned income even lower.

COMCARE financial assistance only reaches approximately 1.7% of our elderly population [5], and the median CPF payouts for those aged 65 and above is very low - as of 2022,

monthly payouts stood at \$530. The government has also increased the retirement age and CPF contribution rates, and encourages seniors to stay in the workforce [6]. By doing so, it reduces already insufficient take-home pay and encourages non-retirement as a solution for older persons who cannot afford to retire.

## **2. Deficits in eldercare: High costs, and inadequate services**

Apart from incomes, the cost of care is also a concern. In 2020, around 69,400 or 11.2% of residents above 65 years of age who lived at home were unable to perform or had a lot of difficulty performing at least one basic activity [2]. Approximately 1 in 10 people above the age of 60 in Singapore suffer from dementia [2]. It is also projected that 1 in 2 healthy Singaporeans aged 65 could become severely disabled in their lifetime [2]. In 2022, 1 in 4 people aged 65 and above had at least 1 chronic health problem.

A Lien foundation study flagged that nearly 40% of long-term care costs for elderly residents are borne out-of-pocket by individuals or families. At the same time, the overall out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure by all domestic households has grown by about 50% from 2010-2021 [6]. As a result, a significant number of older persons forgo care [5].

In 2018, the government estimated that home and community care costs averaged at \$3,100/month [2]. This is a conservative estimate, as another study [5] pointed out that there has been a “persistent gap between the real cost of service delivery and the “norm cost” set by MOH to determine subventions” and that this gap is “particularly large for home care services.” It also mentioned how families who earn just above the eligibility cutoff for means-tested subsidies have to contribute nearly one-third of their income towards financing long-term care for their loved one.

Families who cannot afford long-term care for loved ones may have no choice but to care for them on their own. A research report found that this often caused significant loss [9] in both household income and CPF contributions, which in turn affects the caregiver’s CPF payouts in the future.

Growth in healthcare costs has a disproportionate impact on older persons, who tend to have more medical issues. If nothing is done to ensure that they can access and afford healthcare, the disproportionate impact of medical inflation (averaging at 10% per year) [7] on older patients will continue to increase exponentially over time, hitting each cohort of older persons harder. With the total healthcare cost of older persons in Singapore projected to rise tenfold [8] over the next 15 years to \$66.1 billion annually, we need to act now to ensure that older persons can access the care they deserve and live the rest of their lives with dignity.

## Our Demands

### *Right to Retire*

- 1. Recognise a minimum standard of living, adjusted for inflation and cost of living, and shape policies to ensure that all older people who don't have sufficient retirement savings are able to access enough aid to meet this basic standard, so they too can retire.**
  - a. A study conducted in 2020 found that single elderly persons without chronic health conditions need \$1,421 to attain a basic standard of living, and couples above the age of 65 need \$2,419 (These values need to be adjusted year on year to account for inflation) [10].
  - b. In shaping welfare policies, we must account for what people need, not just what they have (i.e. their income) and what they spend, as many poorer people sacrifice spending on basic needs because they cannot afford to.
- 2. Expand the Silver Support Scheme to ensure that all older persons, regardless of their CPF amount, are able to meet the minimum income standard.**
  - a. Increase the amount that the Silver Support Scheme awards to match the minimum income standard after CPF payouts.
    - i. For example, assuming the minimum income standard to be \$1,421 per month, after a \$530 CPF payout, the Silver Support Scheme should award the remaining \$891 for the month. (Currently, the maximum amount that the Silver Support scheme awards stands at only \$300/month as of 2024.) [11]
  - b. Without such reforms, many low-income elderly, especially those with chronic health conditions, will continue to be pushed into poverty or forced to put themselves at risk by working while in poor health.
- 3. Delink eligibility for the silver support scheme from household income.**
  - a. Remove the Silver Support scheme's current eligibility criteria that takes into account household income.
    - i. The criterion cannot assume that the working people in the household are financially caring for the elderly person(s) who live with them, as this is not always the case.
    - ii. Furthermore, surveys [9,12] have found that it is financially strenuous for working members in the household to be solely responsible for providing and caring for older persons who live with them, especially

if they also have other dependents (e.g. children), earn low incomes themselves, and/or if the elderly person(s) require complex and long-term care.

- iii. Counterproductively, in order to lower the elderly person's household income so that they are eligible for assistance, family members may be perversely incentivised to move out, further distancing the elderly person from their familial support system.

### *Enhance Eldercare Accessibility*

- 4. Undertake a formal review of the affordability of eldercare services, particularly for those with disabilities who require long-term care.**
  - a. A comprehensive review of the affordability of eldercare services should pave the way for more accessible policies and greater subsidies to ensure that no older person is left without the care they require, and that families are not unduly strained by out-of-pocket costs for care services.
- 5. Increase access and adjust quantum for CareShield Life and ElderFund and reduce the amount that is paid out of pocket by individuals.**
  - a. Careshield Life payouts are \$649 a month in 2024 if an individual on the scheme is unable to do 3 or more of 6 Activities of Daily Living. Similarly, ElderFund payouts must increase to meet the cost of long-term care needs. Eligible Singapore Citizens can receive up to only \$250 in monthly cash payouts via ElderFund for as long as they are unable to do three or more Activities of Daily Living (ADLs). This covers only about 10% of the average monthly cost of long-term care, which amounts to \$2,324 [13].
  - b. At the same time, the government should also raise awareness about the Pioneer Generation Disability Assistance Scheme (PioneerDAS) and increase its take-up rate amongst those who need it.
- 6. Waive the fees for receiving a disability assessment.**
  - a. Currently, older persons who want to benefit from ElderFund have to pay \$100 or \$250 to get an MOH-accredited assessor [14], and it is only reimbursed to care recipients who are assessed to be severely disabled. This may deter older persons from seeking the assistance they may need.

*Caring for the Elderly*

- 7. Hire more community workers to build sustainable support structures within residential communities to ensure that elderly residents are well taken care of.**
  - a. It is not uncommon for elderly residents to die alone in their own homes [18]. Building close-knit residential communities can ensure that those in closest physical proximity to elderly residents can extend their support to them, especially in cases when the elderly person does not have or is estranged from their family.

*Life Course Interventions*

- 8. Launch an independent study to investigate the ways in which retirement inadequacy is experienced amongst different social groups, with a focus on the factors earlier in life that have contributed to their current circumstances.**
  - a. These marginalised groups include but are not limited to gender and sexual minorities, racial minorities, people with physical/mental disabilities or chronic conditions, etc.
  - b. The study should inform the government on the life course interventions it must take, such as through the provision of public goods, to nip the contributing factors of retirement inadequacy in the bud.

# **Equitable Healthcare for All**

Access to public healthcare is a basic human right. It must be affordable and accessible for all. No one chooses to be ill and so, no one should face financial ruin when attempting to receive the healthcare they need. Relatedly, for patients to receive the care they deserve, healthcare workers need to have safe, humane working conditions. To this end, urgent reforms are needed to ensure that both patients' and healthcare workers' basic needs are met.

## **1. Unmet Needs of Patients**

Patients in Singapore's public healthcare system face ever-increasing healthcare costs. Significant changes to healthcare payment in the last decade - for example, the introduction of a compulsory deductible, co-payment and co-insurance system to access pay outs from Medishield life or integrated shield plans [1, 2] - mean that Singaporeans need to pay much higher out of pocket expenditures for healthcare. This is especially stark when compared to other countries with comparable GDPs to Singapore [3]. Such high out of pocket payments have been proven to reduce early healthcare access and in fact lead to higher overall costs for healthcare provision [4].

Coupled with the rising costs of essential goods and housing, Singaporeans are rightfully concerned about their inability to afford healthcare.

With bed and manpower crunches, our healthcare outcomes are also at risk. There are unacceptably long waiting times for admission to hospitals, with median waiting times rising up to 42.1 hours in 2023 [5].

## **2. Unmet Needs of Healthcare Workers: *Adequate Rest and Wages***

The Ministry of Health estimates that we will require an increase of more than 82,000 allied health professionals, nurses and support staff by 2030 to meet Singapore's healthcare needs [6]. However, the lack of safe working conditions for healthcare workers is clearly reflected in the high rates of resignation from the public healthcare sector. This crisis in staffing has persisted since the COVID-19 pandemic [7], and has implications on how we can continue to staff new hospitals and healthcare facilities safely.

## **3. The Common Needs of Patients and Healthcare Workers**

The root cause of patients' and healthcare workers' problems is how our healthcare system is being financed. Against the backdrop of growing healthcare costs for patients and a staffing crisis, government expenditure on healthcare is only at 5.57% per annum in

2021, far lower than most OECD countries [8]. While the government decries increased healthcare spending seen elsewhere as “spiralling and escalating out of control” [9], the absence of deeper financial commitment from the state places extreme stress on staff and puts patients at risk.

The increasing privatisation of our public healthcare services in the last decade must be reversed. Privatisation has led to a healthcare system that is fixated on cost effectiveness and profit recovery—our healthcare services are run like businesses rather than as the public service they should be. This is exacerbated by the unequal care provided by tiered wards in hospitals (A, B and C class), as well as the stark differences in the quality and speed of care provided by the public and private healthcare systems. Decentralisation of public healthcare services has also led to a healthcare system that is increasingly more confusing to navigate, hurting Singaporeans who are seeking healthcare.

Our public healthcare system should stop encouraging the interference of market forces, and should be heavily subsidised by the government so as to ensure affordability. The global average of GDP spent on healthcare is 9.8%, and the Singapore government should commit to at least matching this, rather than the marginal increases in healthcare expenditure that they have announced in the National Budget.

Moreover, the distribution of public healthcare should be needs-based. It should provide the best standard of care, serving those whose medical conditions are the most urgent first, regardless of socio-economic class, nationality, or residential status.

## Our Demands:

### *Meeting Patients' Needs: Healthcare Affordability, Accessibility and Availability*

- 1. Ensure all patients in the public healthcare system are treated with the same ethical standards of care regardless of their financial status and medical condition**
  - a. Patients across all payment classes (Class A/B/C) should be treated with the same ethical standards of care and comfort (e.g. same staff-to-patient ratio, equal access to senior consultants, equal amounts of privacy, etc).
  - b. While patients in higher class tiers may pay more to receive optional standards of comfort, they should not be entitled to more or faster medical attention.
  - c. The waiting times before a patient receives medical attention should be based on the acuity and severity of their medical condition, rather than the paying class of the patient (one example is how higher-paying patients have faster access to specialist outpatient clinics).
  - d. In addition, waiting times should be actively improved in areas which have been shown to have long median waiting times, such as mental health [10].
- 2. Expand coverage of the following: (i) claim limits to MediShield Life, (ii) conditions claimable under MediSave and the Chronic Disease Management Programme, (iii) medications within the Subsidised Drugs List**
  - a. Expand coverage of MediShield life to include essential procedures like caesarean sections, abortions, dental work, vaccinations, gender affirming surgeries and more [11]. Increased coverage should be guided by principles of anti-discrimination for a population with diverse healthcare needs. Costs of these changes can be covered from unused MediShield Life premiums [12]. From 2016 to 2019, a total of S\$7.5 billion in premiums were collected, but only S\$3.5 billion in claims were paid out [13].
  - b. With regards the Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP), more comprehensive coverage should be in place for conditions which are currently not part of the list of 23 included conditions [14]. This includes conditions which have significant impacts on patients' quality of life and wellbeing. Some examples include, but are not limited to: thyroid problems, endometriosis, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), dysthymia, obsessive compulsive disorder and alcohol use disorder.

- c. With regards to the Subsidised Drugs List [15] in Singapore, coverage should be expanded beyond the current list of medications to include second-line or third-line medication options for conditions which fail to respond effectively to first-line therapy. This includes but is not limited to oral contraceptive pills for the management of menstrual disorders, or atypical antidepressants/ second-generation antipsychotics for psychiatric disorders.

### **3. Expand MediFund utilisation**

- a. For decades, many patients in Singapore have struggled to afford hospital expenses. The government claims it is committed to strengthening safety nets for those who are unable to pay for their medical bills, but much of MediFund remains underutilised while Singaporeans continue to struggle with the rising cost of healthcare.
- b. On average, the amount of MediFund assistance provided was \$912 per inpatient treatment, and \$95 per outpatient treatment [16]. For context as to how grossly inadequate this is, the cost of a simple surgery with admission for class C patients is estimated to be around \$2,500 [17].
- c. At the end of financial year 2021, the respective capital sums for MediFund and MediFund Silver stood at \$3.3 billion and \$1.4 billion, yet only \$164.1 million (less than 4%) was utilised [18]. Moreover, with MediFund receiving an additional \$1.5 billion top up in 2023 [19], a significant majority of MediFund remains untouched yearly, reflecting that we do have the financial capacity to increase our payouts to help patients in need.

### **4. Introduce a unified application process for accessing healthcare subsidies across all clusters, and improve transparency of criteria for accessing subsidies**

- a. Currently, patients who have financial assistance approved in one healthcare cluster are still required to re-apply for assistance if they are accessing healthcare services in another hospital cluster. This leads to significant delays in accessing healthcare, and requires applicants to undergo demeaning means-testing processes repeatedly.
- b. While MOH has said that guidelines are provided to the MediFund committee of each hospital, the committees retain full discretion over the provision of assistance, and their decision-making process is opaque [20]. The guidelines are unpublished, and the rationale for rejection, as well as the percentage of cases that are rejected from subsidy programmes like MediFund at each hospital are not published [21].

- c. MediFund disbursements remain heavily dependent on the strength of each medical social workers' advocacy for their patients, and each institution's internal disbursement criteria. This means that patients in similar circumstances and levels of need often have differentiated outcomes, due to factors out of their control. Schemes like MediFund that provide aid should be made as easy and equitable as possible for people in need to benefit from.
- 5. Guarantee access to subsidised public healthcare regardless of residential status, nationality or employment**
- a. 30% of Singapore's resident population are PRs and foreigners [22]. While they actively contribute towards Singapore (for instance, funding the healthcare system through taxation), they are not able to reap many of the benefits that are funded through the taxes they pay because they are not entitled to the same subsidies and schemes as citizens. Furthermore, a significant number of our healthcare workers are not local. As our healthcare needs have expanded exponentially since the COVID pandemic, we continue to take in a large number of immigrant workers to meet our needs. In just 2020 alone, 52% of new nurses registered with the Singapore Nursing Board were non locals [23]. These foreign healthcare workers are put in a position where they cannot afford the services they help provide.
  - b. Gig workers in Singapore face inadequate healthcare coverage due to a lack of proper regulations. A good first step would be to end the practice of platforms tying work performance to the extent of insurance coverage received by each worker [24].
  - c. Migrant and domestic workers face hefty costs and sometimes risk deportation when they seek healthcare if the employer deems them too expensive to retain. We need to ensure that better protections are put in place, starting with ensuring that insurance for domestic workers covers all outpatient services, as well as removing the requirement of a letter of guarantee from the employer before the worker can gain access to the healthcare they need. To offset some of the healthcare costs from employers, the government should subsidise or centralise this insurance.
  - d. Access to healthcare should first and foremost be based on the needs of the patient, not which country they are from nor their ability to afford healthcare they require. The labour of all these workers keeps our country and healthcare systems moving. They should therefore have every right to subsidised healthcare.

- e. It is important for workers who are injured at work to be sufficiently compensated. All workers, including gig workers and domestic workers, should be included under WICA (Work Injury Compensation Act) [25]. This ensures that these workers have protected medical leave wages and better medical expense coverage for work accidents.
- 6. Intermediate and Long-Term Care Services (ILTC) should be expanded, and subsidies for these services increased.**
- a. Due to our ageing population, the demand for intermediate and long term care has significantly increased in quantity and complexity. Therefore, despite the increase in availability of such services, the waiting time to access these services has not reduced [26]. As a result, Singaporeans struggle with providing the necessary care at home in the meantime, further contributing to the bed crunch when patients are admitted due to family and caregiver crisis.
  - b. We need greater investment into expanding ILTC services, especially home-based and centre-based services. This should be government funded and heavily subsidised to ensure accessibility. This is in line with the government's direction of shifting away from heavy reliance on tertiary healthcare, towards healthcare provision centred in communities and homes.

*Meeting Healthcare Workers' Needs: Adequate Rest and Wages*

- 7. Introduce regulations to ensure safe working hours and staff-to-patient ratios for healthcare workers**
- a. Junior doctors can be made to work 30 hours or more without sleep, and sometimes work more than 100 hours a week. Nurses are still asked to work PM-AM-PM-AM shifts – or PAPA shifts, which does not provide for sufficient rest times between shifts. Not only is this detrimental to the health and retention of healthcare workers, it has been proven to increase the risk of medical errors, compromising the quality of care provided to patients [27]. Despite multiple attempts by numerous individuals to bring this up for discussion in Parliament, the government has repeatedly dismissed such working hours as extraordinary circumstances even though these conditions are often the norm [28].
  - b. Beyond working hours, it is crucial that the ratios of staff to patients are safe and sustainable, especially overnight. For example, when a junior doctor is working overnight, they can be responsible for the care of up to

100 patients. Similarly, each nurse on night shift in the general wards can be responsible for the nursing needs of more patients than the usual ratio of 1 nurse to 4-5 patients during daytime hours. These unsafe ratios overwork our healthcare staff and put patients at risk.

- c. The government continues to resist setting limits on working hours [29]. It is unsustainable and unsafe for our healthcare system to be run by overworked staff. We urgently need stricter guidelines and legislations on work hours and staffing ratios.

**8. Compensate healthcare workers fairly and ensure their qualifications are affordable to attain**

- a. Healthcare is a mentally and physically taxing field to work in. In addition, it often requires significant expertise and continuous training, which can be costly. And yet, nursing pay can start as low as \$2050 a month [23], lower than the recommended living wage in Singapore [30].
- b. While the starting salaries of doctors and allied health professionals with degrees start at \$4500 [31] per month and \$3650 [32] per month respectively, the cost of their tuition fees and professional exams [33], even after subsidy, is significantly higher than other fields of study and certification. This results in significant barriers to education and training.
- c. In addition, due to significant staff shortages, healthcare staff are often required to stay past their stipulated working hours. These overtime hours are not compensated because healthcare workers are not considered "workmen" under the Employment Act [34]. This reflects how the system undervalues the time of healthcare workers. All healthcare workers should qualify for overtime pay.

**9. Comprehensively review sick leave and annual leave policies**

- a. Healthcare workers' sick leave and annual leave provisions are far from fair. One key reform that is needed is ending the unethical practice of expecting healthcare workers to find their own replacements before being able to take leave. No one wants an unwell healthcare worker to be caring for their family members, and the responsibility of having enough workers on the roster to replace someone who is ill should lie with the management, not the workers.
- b. All healthcare workers deserve to have guaranteed leave or time off, without which, we continue to increase the burnout and attrition of our frontline workers.

## Tackling the Climate Crisis with Environmental Justice

The climate crisis is a multi-faceted crisis that will affect all sectors of society. Importantly, we must recognise that those who have contributed the least to the climate crisis are usually the ones who are affected the most. A transition away from our carbon-dependent paradigm is urgently needed. Crucially, any climate mitigation and adaptation plans must be embedded with a focus on environmental justice and equity: who will pay for the climate crisis and how are we protecting underserved, underrepresented, marginalised communities?

### **1. Lack of ambitious goals and transparency in Singapore's plan to transition away from fossil fuels**

Singapore's carbon pricing still falls short of scientific recommendations, particularly as a high-income country. Our annual carbon tax revenue is also not publicly declared, limiting transparency and accountability. There is no transparency in understanding what proportion of Singapore's carbon tax revenue goes to supporting businesses, and what proportion goes to households and vulnerable communities. Meanwhile, it was recently reported that companies in the refining and downstream sectors will receive carbon tax allowances of up to 76% [1].

Relatedly, there are currently no robust policy tools to ensure that ordinary households and consumers are not disproportionately penalised by the carbon tax [2]. The distributional impacts of a higher price must also be given utmost priority, to alleviate the impacts on ordinary households and consumers. An appropriate policy instrument would be a form of carbon dividend, which redistributes the revenues from a carbon tax directly back to citizens, ideally with a higher proportion going towards lower-income households. Furthermore, steps should be taken to ensure that the carbon dividend is not a one-time payout like GST vouchers, but rather, a consistent payout.

The recent Carbon Pricing (Amendment) Act grants the Minister for Trade and Industry the ability to give allowances for companies that make exports or "is of sufficient economic or strategic importance". This is not aligned with the no-exception approach "to maintain a transparent, fair and consistent carbon price" as outlined during its introduction in 2018 [3].

In October 2022, Minister Lawrence Wong announced that Singapore will aim to reach net zero emissions by 2050 [4]. However, the government has not made transparent the trajectory of the transition, the categories of the measures that will be required, and the approximate magnitude of emissions that we can avoid from each measure. There is also little publicly reported information on Singapore's imported energy sources. Although

imported emissions are not part of carbon accounting, providing transparency will allow the public to understand Singapore's responsibility for affecting local and indigenous communities in neighbouring countries. For example, the limited information available on Singapore's energy imports highlight that conditional approval has been granted to projects sourcing power from Indonesia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which will "collectively tap on a diverse mix of solar energy, hydropower, and wind power" [5]. Moreover, the existing Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project (LTMS-PIP) will see "up to 100 megawatts (MW) of renewable hydropower" traded from Laos PDR to Singapore [6]. However, hydropower, such as those generated from mega dam projects along the Mekong River, might affect communities residing closeby, and is associated with negative environmental impacts on the river and the biodiversity within.

## **2. Little to no recognition for our indigenous communities**

After so many years, we still have not recognised the displaced communities of Singapore's early inhabitants, such as the Orang Laut / Orang Pulau who were displaced during the development of Pulau Semakau as an offshore landfill [7]. The government should recognise and acknowledge the many spaces, traditions and livelihoods that have already been lost, for example, the communities that were affected by the development of Pulau Bukom and Jurong Island. The impacts of displacement are generational and exist to this day. Preservation of what is left of our indigenous communities and cultures can be the first step in taking accountability for these previous displacements.

Additionally, there seems to be little attention paid to the protection of indigenous traditions when implementing environmental and climate mitigation policies. For example, the recent building of the OCBC Mangrove Park means that indigenous communities can no longer go there to forage for food, but this issue has been overshadowed by the broader narrative as a climate change mitigation strategy.

## **3. Protecting workers' livelihoods from the impacts of the climate crisis**

As we start to wind down and transition away from polluting industries such as the petrochemical sector, workers must be adequately protected. Oftentimes, the workers that face the most precarity are the lowest wage-earners in these companies. There have been multiple reports over the years that these workers are victims of unfair severance packages and/or sudden redundancies, sometimes under the guise of 'performance' [8]. Additionally, these workers must be guaranteed adequate training so that they can effectively pivot away and use their skills and labour for more regenerative industries.

Singapore is getting increasingly hotter and weather changes are becoming more unpredictable. Heat inequality must be seriously reckoned with. As temperatures rise, low-income households and workers who labour outdoors will be disproportionately affected as they have limited access to air-conditioning and other cooling mechanisms

[9]. For workers, especially migrant construction workers, this becomes a serious workplace safety issue. We have already seen fatal examples linked to heat stress [10]. While recognising that some measures exist [11], measures to manage heat stress must not only be robust but they must also ensure that workers do not have to compensate through overtime or the rushing of jobs, which will ultimately still have a negative impact on workplace safety [12].

Against the backdrop of more unpredictable weather like heavy rains [15], the safety of food delivery riders on our roads must come under scrutiny. Long hours, fatigue and the pressure to meet targets and gain incentives, coupled with a lack of strong cycling infrastructure mean that riders are seriously at risk of road accidents. Better transport infrastructure will not only lead to a safer Singapore, it will also lead to the saving of lives.

#### **4. Are we good neighbours? Our complicity and responsibility within the region**

Given the effects of our contributions to the climate crisis in Southeast Asia, Singapore, along with other developed countries, can and should do more to mitigate the climate crisis in the region. Singapore should contribute to the Loss and Damage Fund, which was previously set up at COP27, as opposed to just being a "galvaniser of financing". [16]. Non-Annex I countries such as the United Arab Emirates have already contributed to the fund.

According to the Global Climate Risk index, Myanmar, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand are among the 10 countries in the world most affected by climate change in the past 20 years [17]. We should also consider having more open national conversations about supporting climate refugees from neighbouring countries which we have directly or indirectly wrought damage to.

While Singapore may not be able to control the creation and implementation of laws in other countries, Singapore has the power, as a buying nation for resources like sand and energy, to demonstrate our concrete commitment to sustainable development. We have already seen how other countries are doing the same in other contexts, such as the European Union's Regulation on Deforestation Free Products (EUDR) [18]. It is paramount that Singapore begins working towards designing such a preventive policy that takes into consideration the environmental and social aspects, such as by incorporating environmental and social impact assessments when purchasing and importing resources (like sand and energy), as opposed to simply complying with the laws and regulations of the source countries [19].

Besides sand, another key resource import where environmental impacts should be closely studied is energy, such as under the ASEAN power grid initiative. For example, if this power is to be generated by mega dam projects along the Mekong River in Lao PDR

and Cambodia, the environmental, social, and economic impacts imposed on the freshwater habitats in the Mekong River and the rural communities that depend upon them needs to be carefully considered and strongly safeguarded. We have also heard upcoming plans to export electricity from Sarawak to Singapore [20], with the electricity most likely to come from mega dam projects that have had a history of causing poor social and environmental outcomes to local communities [21, 22, 23].

Since 2021, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) has recognised the need for countries across Southeast Asia to possess an instrument that promotes environmental rights. The ASEAN Environmental Rights Declaration was initially constructed to be a legally binding framework. However, it has become a toothless non-binding declaration. Substantive rights have also been cut down from seven articles to one.

The Declaration is a soft framework that should not only aim to protect the environment but also to ensure the safety of those who are in vulnerable situations due to their work in environmental protection, such as environmental rights defenders, rangers and journalists. If Singapore is indeed determined to be a good neighbour, it should play its part in ensuring the Declaration is strengthened and that countries are held accountable to it.

## **5. Loose Regulations on the Plastics Industry**

Plastic pollution problems will keep increasing if we do not pay attention to the source of the pollution [24]. Singapore, home to several plastic producing companies, should take appropriate action to regulate the upstream supply of plastics.

Presently, just like any other company, start-up plastic producing companies enjoy tax breaks and support to expand their production into other countries. As a result, our plastic producing capabilities continue to enjoy high annual turnover over the decades [25].

Instead of tackling plastics production, Singapore is investing even more into downstream capabilities, such as the setting up of a Plastics Recycling Association in 2021. However, this launch, alongside the growth of NEA-led campaigns about the right way to recycle have shown little effectiveness in actually improving our plastic recycling rates [26]. This is not only due to contamination, but also because most plastics have toxic additives and dyes that make them impossible to recycle. Even if they are recycled, due to the heavy use of chemicals in almost all plastics, alongside how the recycling process can generate new toxic chemicals such as dioxins, chemical contaminants are embedded in literally all new recycled products [27].

## Our Demands

### *More Ambitious Carbon Pricing and Reduction Targets*

#### **1. Strengthen the carbon tax in line with international recommendations.**

- a. While we understand the risk of economic leakage, we must commit to a carbon tax level that is more in line with international recommendations for high-income economies.
- b. For example, the IMF suggests a US\$75/tonne price floor for high-income economies [28], while the LSE Grantham Institute suggests a price of US\$145/tonne [29]. Singapore's current proposed range is roughly US\$35-56/tonne (S\$50-80/tonne) by 2030.
- c. In advance of the 2030 target, the government should conduct a mid-term review of the carbon tax and implement a clearer rate, as the current range is too large.
- d. The annual carbon tax revenue should be made publicly known for transparency and accountability.

#### **2. Remove carbon tax allowances for emissions-intensive industries.**

- a. The amount of carbon allowances given should be limited given that companies in EITE (Emission Intensive Trade Exposed) industries may already pay below the national corporate tax rate. While Singapore's corporate tax rate is 17%, [30] some MNCs in Singapore are paying a far lower effective tax rate [31].
- b. Ministerial discretion should not be used to give EITE sectors a free pass, and any allowances given should be made known to the public. We propose the creation of a public registry, maintained by the National Climate Change Secretariat (NCCS) and publicly accessible on its website, that sets out the recipients of the allowances, the amount of the award of allowances, and the emissions years [32].

#### **3. Mandate carbon reduction targets and climate transition roadmaps for large companies.**

- a. The government should mandate that all companies in various sectors (with no less than \$100 million in annual turnover) work towards peaking their carbon emissions before 2030 and/or achieving a net zero carbon target by 2050, with no exemptions given for any industry or company.

- b. Industry targets for carbon emissions should be specified. Large emitters covered by the carbon tax should then be asked to submit plans on when and how they intend to peak their emissions, on top of the existing requirements of the Emissions Report and Monitoring Plan. These reports should be publicly released on a dedicated government website to ensure accountability.
- c. To achieve these ambitious targets, a matching program can be introduced to connect Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs) with carbon neutrality experts and networks that promote carbon neutrality, such as the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance (CNCA) [33], C40 Cities [34] and Local Governments for Sustainability – ICLEI [35].

*Increased Transparency and Inclusion While Journeying Towards Net-Zero*

**4. Increase transparency of our intended pathway to net-zero by 2050.**

- a. The government should publish a clear plan outlining the timeline and measures involved in reaching the net-zero target by 2050.
- b. A large portion of our national emissions will have to be offset, however it is important that these carbon offsets actually have their stated impact and do not harm marginalised communities as a result. Carbon credit exchange companies that have been known to violate environmental rights and international standards ought to be blacklisted until there is full transparency and commitment to new practices.
- c. For example, the Bursa Carbon Exchange (BCX) was recently called out for its involvement in high-risk carbon credit projects that have been associated with human rights conflicts [36].
- d. Easy access to data on our national emissions profile should be provided. Many initiatives such as the Resource Efficiency Grant for Energy and Energy Efficiency Fund have been enacted to support businesses in the transition to net-zero. It would be helpful to understand better to what extent these initiatives have been successful for businesses so that third-party experts and observers can offer insight into how they can further accelerate their transition.

**5. Meaningfully engage the broader public on environmental policies.**

- a. Citizens, including youth and disproportionately impacted communities, should be meaningfully engaged on environmental policies. These consultations should be accessible and conducted in non-technocratic ways. Environmental policymaking should not be limited to expert opinion,

- but also consider the lived experiences, needs, and advice of marginalised communities such as low-income communities.
- b. An example of an open and transparent consultation, with clear and accessible communication on how feedback is considered and accounted for, is NCCS' 94-page document responding to specific public comments [37]. While we applaud such efforts, several areas of improvement can be implemented:
    - i. Give a longer lead time of 2 months for the public to respond to the call for public feedback. At hand, the lead time is about one month.
    - ii. Widen announcement platforms about ongoing consultations to social media, newspapers, TVs, radio, digital flyers, etc.
    - iii. Feedback forms and summaries of reports and findings should be in all four of our national languages to cater to different groups.
  - c. Beyond consultations, we want to see more civic participation activities that are collaborative and empowering. We recommend the approaches stated in the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) [37]:
    - i. Civil society should be involved more fully in decision-making processes. This could take the form of people's advisory committees to help co-deliberate policies, or people's town halls that could decide on the policies to implement. These committees should also be diverse and consist of members from different demographics and backgrounds such as age, race, socioeconomic status, sector, etc.
    - ii. One actionable step is the co-creation of energy plans. The government can reach out to local energy-focused youth groups, such as [Energy CoLab](#), to get youth involved in our energy transition conversations and long-term plans, such as on the ASEAN Power Grid initiative or the consideration of nuclear power.

## **6. Recognise and include narratives of sustainability from indigenous communities.**

- a. Include members of indigenous communities in consultations on environmental issues such as land reclamation, seascapes developments and urban planning that may have an impact on the practice of their cultural

traditions. They should be consulted when environmental impact assessments (EIAs) are conducted to safeguard their vulnerable practices.

- b. Appoint an Orang Laut / Orang Pulau community member or establish a committee of former islanders as advisors to the government agencies responsible for redevelopment efforts in areas that are culturally and historically significant to the community, such as Pulau Brani and the Greater Southern Waterfront.
- c. Support the preservation of indigenous cultures and their communities through the integration of nationwide education on indigenous histories & cultures into school curricula, the funding of projects with similar aims such as local and community forestry projects in collaboration with different communities, and the provision of necessary infrastructures and spaces to prolong the practice of their traditions.
- d. Introduce policies that can support the practice of Orang Laut / Orang Pulau culture and traditions. For instance, having dedicated spaces for the community to practise island traditions and docking of traditional boats and vessels, with the inclusion of land and sea spaces for maritime crafts and activities.
- e. The community should be explicitly acknowledged through, for instance, the renaming of landmarks, restatement of original names, and dedicated educational centres that focus on indigenous history.

#### *Ensuring a Just Transition*

### **7. Protect workers in polluting industries and invest in good green jobs**

- a. Workers in the petrochemical sector—a sunset industry—must be given more agency and bargaining capabilities, so that they can protect themselves against unfair severance packages, and forced and/or sudden redundancies [38]. The lack of agency is particularly the case for migrant workers, who generally suffer limited job mobility [39].
- b. Companies in sunset industries have to present roadmaps outlining how they plan to deal with the energy transition. In particular, it should be mandatory for them to train their workers in preparation for greener jobs.
- c. More investment is needed in greener, more regenerative jobs. We recognise the formation of the Career Conversion Programme for Sustainability professionals, among other programmes [40]. The data on the uptake and efficacy of these programmes should be released in due course.

## **8. Strengthen protections against unsafe working conditions**

- a. Ensure that Stop Work Orders do not have the counterproductive effect of creating more cost-pressures and safety risks in workplace practices. More communication between contractors and developers are needed to ensure that deadlines are adjusted if a Stop Work Order is issued.
- b. Continue looking at improving the measures to reduce heat stress risks for outdoor workers [41].

## **9. Introduce Pedestrian-First street designs**

- a. Introduce a Movement-Place framework in street designs [42]. Currently, roads are classified from CAT 1 to CAT 5, depending on a road's ability to handle traffic.
  - i. A Movement-Place framework gives street designers the opportunity to create pedestrian-friendly streets in neighbourhoods characterised by community life, with streets that prioritise liveability over traffic flow.
- b. Change the way we measure traffic in Singapore
  - i. Our transportation system should focus on measuring the number of people, as opposed to measuring traffic against car units, as it currently does. Instead of viewing a bus as 2.5 car units, urban developers, engineers and the state should see a bus as a vehicle that carries around 139 people instead. This mental model shifts the value towards people, and this could nudge stakeholders into prioritising public transport. [43]

## **10. Strengthen the regulatory regime to stop illegal resource extractive activities in Southeast Asia, particularly in countries that export resources to Singapore.**

- a. We propose a regulatory regime whereby sand and other resource imports should be accompanied with Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) developed with local governments from the exporting countries. [44, 45]
  - i. This regulatory regime should take on a multi-pronged approach involving three levels: government, corporations, and community. All three levels should actively work towards prevention of harm, as well as provide spaces for effective remedies and compensation for those harmed.

- ii. At the government level, strong laws and their effective enforcement (e.g. regular inspections) are crucial to ensure that illegal sand mining does not take place; and if they do, work permits for the errant company should be indefinitely terminated until the corporation has proven that they have amended all bad practices. The illegally mined sand should also not be allowed to be exported.
  - iii. At the corporation level, designing robust Grievance Procedures (e.g. see [Wilmar International's Grievance Procedures](#)) are needed to ensure speedy attention is given to those harmed by the corporation's activities.
  - iv. At the community level, rights education and legal aid should be made accessible so that the community knows the appropriate channels in which they can seek recourse to and obtain appropriate reparations in light of environmental violations. Communities who push back against resource extractive activities have been known to suffer threats, attacks, intimidation, criminalization, and/or lawsuits against them [46, 47, 48], and should be afforded protections.
- b. One way in which the regulatory regime in the region can be strengthened is through the ASEAN Environmental Rights Declaration – it should start the discussion of a Regional Implementation Plan. Based on consolidated feedback from the public and civil society [49], we call for Singapore to urge the working group to:
- i. Stop weakening the declaration by means of removing all important texts on substantive and procedural elements, such as indigenous communities, environmental human rights defenders, environmental impact assessment, research and education, and public participation.
  - ii. Strengthen public participation in the regional implementation plan by supporting stakeholders and public involvement in the policymaking process at all levels.
  - iii. Recognise, protect and enforce the environmental rights of environmental defenders, indigenous peoples, youth, and other vulnerable groups.

*Strengthening Our Plastic Regulation Infrastructure*

**11. Tighten upstream regulations for plastics.**

- a. Introduce stronger upstream regulations on plastics-producing companies, namely (a) Ensure transparency, tracking, monitoring and labelling of plastic products; (b) Impose a national reduction target on plastics production; and (c) Impose a plastic pollution fee on plastics-producing companies.
- b. Commit to more transparency on the chemical composition of plastics, alongside their environmental and human health hazardous impacts.
  - i. Since the exposure to toxins may not result in immediate workplace fatalities or minor injuries, this may go unreported to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), which collects data on the above in annual workplace safety and health reports [51]. However, people may only suffer the health impacts after years of accumulation and exposure to the chemical, or suffer chronic illnesses that may not be classified as “minor injuries”. MOM must ensure the long-term health implications of toxin exposure is reported on.
  - ii. Other countries’ environments may also be affected due to the lack of transparency and knowledge of these chemical compounds. In a brand audit conducted earlier this year [52], Singapore-based company Yes 2 Healthy Life was identified as a top sachet polluter in the Philippines.
- c. Regulate the use of ambiguous/misleading greenwashing terms (e.g. biodegradable, environmentally friendly, natural, etc).
- d. Implement national reduction targets for plastics production and supply.
  - i. A science-based reduction target should be implemented as soon as possible. A 2023 UNEP report [53] informs us that with specific levers for system change, over 80% of plastic pollution could be reduced by 2040. Countries in the High Ambition Coalition, Rwanda and Peru, have put forth a target to reduce global primary plastic polymer: 40% by 2040, from a 2025 baseline [54]. Singapore should also assess what a feasible yet ambitious national target would be, and ensure civil society participation in the decision-making process.
- e. Impose a plastic pollution fee on petrochemical companies producing primary plastic polymers.
  - i. A plastic pollution fee would serve as a mandatory contribution from the private sector to a finance pool at the United Nations (UN).
  - ii. This is consistent with the Polluter Pays Principle and supports control measures to address the full life cycle of plastics [55].

- iii. This system would ensure a stable and predictable source of funding for Treaty implementation, and can also function as a unique and innovative funding mechanism (complementing traditional funding sources i.e. funding by national governments).

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