

Panel urges help for 'vulnerable' workers as job losses loom

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LOW-WAGE workers and freelancers in the gig economy have been identified as vulnerable groups in the labour market, as the spectre of unemployment looms over Singapore.

Broader employer insurance, government-funded sick leave and an early drawdown of Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings were among the possible solutions debated at a virtual Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) roundtable on Wednesday evening.

Though "we are always going to have vulnerable segments of the economy", the question is how to improve the training and deployment of workers, said Desmond Choo, assistant secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress.

That's as a trend of "precarious employment", driven in recent years by globalisation and technology, "has now been accentuated further by the Covid-19 pandemic", according to panel moderator and IPS senior research fellow Christopher Gee.

Some 196,100 Singapore residents were "own account workers" without any employees, as at mid-2019. Ong Qiyun, a social services researcher at the National University of Singapore, also highlighted full-time staff with low wages, entitlements such as leave, and bargaining power - for example, those in security or food services - as another group to watch.

Dr Ong, who co-wrote a recent proposal for temporary universal basic income during the virus crisis, suggested moves such as government-funded sick leave and unemployment insurance for low-wage workers.

"It is very difficult to recover once the companies have it in them that people are able to tolerate this kind of work conditions and this kind of pay," she added, calling for both union representation and "some sort of payout to support these workers".

Meanwhile, Mr Choo urged companies with healthy balance sheets to step up and invest in training, as "erosion of human capital in any crisis is the biggest impediment".

"If companies can go in, contribute to the cost, train our workers, retain them, that is going to make unemployment a lot more manageable," he said, arguing that this will shorten the time that laid-off workers stay jobless "and help the economy to get a better rebound" after Covid-19 is dealt with.

Dr Ong and Mr Choo also agreed that letting low-wage workers tap CPF accounts would be tough, as they may have used the funds for housing or had low balances to begin with.

Otherwise, Lim Yew Heng, regional public affairs head at ride-hailing firm Grab, said that the gig ecosystem must be "more resilient and more robust" to prepare workers for the prospect of a prolonged recession.

The challenge is to ensure that consumers are not overpaying, workers are making a living, and the tech companies can be sustainable, he said.

Separately, Mr Choo said that the labour movement is looking into enhancing protections for some contract workers, but did not elaborate.

"By law, there's a limit to how much you can represent them," Mr Choo said. "Do we then change some of these legal constraints, if we think that this group of workers is going to grow in numbers and significance over time, especially in their contribution to GDP? I think that's going to be the next bound of study for us."