

Migrant workers vital to S'pore economy, govt improving work & living conditions, but society also plays a part in helping them integrate: Lawrence Wong

Wong also asked Singaporeans to do their part to welcome migrant workers.

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On Aug. 14, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Lawrence Wong spoke at the Reinventing Destiny IPS conference, which commemorated the 100th birth year anniversary of Lee Kuan Yew.

Wong was participating in a Q&A session moderated by *CNN* host Fareed Zakaria, when he was asked a question about migrant workers.

Wong addressed the issue, saying that the government is doing everything it can to improve their working and living conditions, but it will also ensure those who join Singapore's society on a permanent basis are the ones with the best chance to integrate and embrace the Singapore way of life.

A solely utilitarian view of migrant workers

The question came from a Raffles Institution student, who referenced events related to conditions in foreign worker dormitories that came to light during the Covid-19 pandemic.

He said that in his view, it revealed that migrants workers were "still being marginalised", and that "more still has to be done to integrate them".

The student said that he felt the current work permit system impedes the ability of migrant workers to connect with Singaporeans, and that the laws which prevented them from bringing in their dependents, or applying for permanent residency or citizenship, stressed the idea that the workers were simply transient, with no purpose other than work.

He asked, in light on plans to have more such workers in Singapore's workforce, whether it might make sense to move away from such a "solely utilitarian view of workers" or otherwise the change the system.

Zakaria, who had initially requested a batch of questions for Wong to answer, clearly felt the question significant enough that he asked Wong to focus on it right away.

Owe it to them to improve standards

Wong answered by first paying tribute to migrant workers as a "very vital part of our economy", as we saw the sacrifices that they made during the Covid period, and how much they contributed to building Singapore, from residences to working in the ports, to name but a few.

"So we do owe it to our migrant workers, particularly the work permit holders, to make sure that they can work safely here, to make sure that they have a good environment in Singapore.

And we are continuing to improve our standards."

Wong said the Singaporean government had recently updated dormitory standards to ensure a better living environment, and would be continuing to look at different ways to take care of those migrant workers including considerations for mental well-being, recreation spaces, and a range of other issues.

Comparing Singapore to other countries which had large proportions of migrant workers, Wong said "in good conscience (we could) say that in Singapore we treat our migrant workers well", and the government will continue to do better.

Balance and gating

Wong addressed the student's claim of "structural impediments" in terms of workers bringing dependents or obtaining permanent residency.

"Yes, there will be challenges if all of them suddenly overnight become permanent residents and or bring their dependents," he said, and added we will not be able to integrate all of them into our society.

"So, one has to understand the balance. We have migrant workers in our midst, we welcome them," Wong said.

But among the "whole spread of migrant workers", from work permits to employment passes, a small proportion would become PRs, and eventually citizens.

This process is "gated" and regulated to ensure those who do come in and become citizens "are the ones with the best chance to integrate into our society and embrace our way of life".

While that regulation would always be there, it did not mean that Singapore would treat migrant workers badly. The government will do everything it can to improve their work and living conditions.

Wong also appealed to Singaporeans to do their part:

"And that's why if (the government) were to build a (worker) dormitory next to your home, please welcome that dormitory with open arms," Wong said, to applause from the audience.