

NMP Walter Theseira: S'poreans have 'ethical duty' to treat migrant workers better

Andrew Koay

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The benefit that Singaporeans derive from the low cost migrant workers make it harder for improvements to their living standards to be implemented, said nominated member of Parliament (NMP) Walter Theseira.

Speaking at an online forum on migrant workers organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on May 6, Theseira — an associate professor at Economics at the Singapore University of Social Sciences — said that his was the basic problem the nation had to overcome if migrant workers were to be treated better.

The IPS held an online forum on migrant workers to discuss the policy responses and lessons learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Its actually in our own economic self-interest for the average Singaporean for there not to be substantial change," Theseira said.

According to Theseira, migrant worker labour reduces the cost of any low-to-medium skill, labour intensive good or service in Singapore.

Without a large migrant worker population, it would be hard to supply many goods and services at the costs that Singaporeans have come to expect.

However, while this created value for Singaporeans, Theseira posited that the workers did not receive back much value for themselves — a consequence of the high supply of workers overseas who want to come to Singapore, and the resulting low bargaining power this gives workers already here.

The NMP acknowledged that it would be "painful" but that Singapore had an "ethical duty to treat other people in Singapore as we would want to be treated".

"I think that means trying to figure out what are a set of common standards that apply to Singaporean workers as well as migrant workers."

He suggested that when it came to living standards, a point of reference may be to look at what Singaporeans would expect if they were to live in a worker dormitory for an extended period of time.

"Not in my backyard"

Also on the panel, sociologist Paulin Straughan observed that apart from financial costs, Singaporeans would have to come to terms with emotional hinderances as well.

The former NMP referred to a post by her Member of Parliament Christopher de Souza, which announced that an old school building in Ulu Pandan had been set aside to house 1,000 migrant workers.

The post she said, drew comments from "polite, but worried" residents who expressed concerns over compromised safety and security should the migrant workers move in.

Addressing the "not in my backyard" sentiment, Bernard Menon, an executive director at the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC), said that Singaporeans had to question themselves.

"Is this 'us vs. them' mentality right?" he said, adding that he hoped the increase in support for migrant workers amidst the Covid-19 pandemic would be sustained after the crisis subsided and result in real change.

Who leads change?

Whether change for migrant worker living standards should come from the ground up or be initiated by the government was another point of discussion amongst the panelists.

Public health expert and associate professor at the National University of Singapore Jeremy Lim said he was skeptical over the prospects of change coming from the private sector.

"The private sector by its nature has to balance the books. It has to be about revenue and really, margin optimisation. As long as it is legal then I think it is unrealistic to expect the private sector to do more."

Lim argued that the migrant workers had been vulnerable "by essentially policy design".

Earlier in the forum, Lim had presented on how policy regarding migrant workers has been based on a "mental model" where workers were "part of the community, but they are separate."

"We accept that there should be different standards," said Lim regarding how the model played out.

This, he suggested, could be seen in how the government had responded to the pandemic in Singapore, where migrant worker cases of Covid-19 treated as separate from cases in the community.

Seeming to suggest that changing policy would be the way forward for positive change, Lim said "I do think this is one instance where the government has to show moral leadership".

Yet, for Theseira, substantial change can only occur with the change of societal mindsets.

"It's normal to frame this as 'oh I want the government to go and do something about this'. Reality is the government does what it thinks the public will support."

Theseira said that it would take "some expression of the popular will" for the government to implement structural change.

He expressed optimism that the pandemic might trigger Singaporeans to question the need for "so many migrant workers in the particular structure we have here in Singapore" leading to an "opportunity to restructure a bit".

"I think its possible to bring everybody to the discussion table," said Menon, who took a middle ground between Theseira's popular will-led change and Lim's call for top-down leadership.

"Unless we come up with a solution that every sector of our society plays a part in arriving at, then I don't think — even we have a solution — it will be a sustainable solution in the longterm."