

WP calls for minimum wage 'right now' while PAP, PSP cite need for higher productivity: IPS forum

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A minimum wage, gender equality and party leadership succession were the main hot-button issues that came up at an online dialogue on Thursday (Oct 22) involving representatives from three political parties.

The online forum, on the parties' assessment of GE2020 and their agenda for the next few years, was organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

In a series of post-election forums, the IPS had presented recently its survey findings on the results of the general election held in July and the use of the Internet and media in GE2020.

At Thursday's event on IPS Facebook page, moderated by the institute's senior research fellow, Dr Gillian Koh, the panellists responded to questions raised by the audience during the session.

Minimum wage

When asked if there is consensus in the Workers' Party on how soon should Singapore implement a minimum wage, Sengkang MP Louis Chua said the party is keen to do it "right now".

The WP does not see a minimum wage and Singapore's Progressive Wage Model (PWM) as diametrically opposed, he said.

"It's about people having to feed their families at this point in time, and not having to wait for (the PWM) to be rolled out to their particular sector," he added.

The PWM - a framework where workers can earn higher salaries as they upgrade their skills - has been the subject of robust debate in Parliament.

The WP is pushing for full-time Singaporean workers to be paid a minimum of \$1,300 a month.

Responding to the WP's proposal in Parliament last week, deputy labour chief Koh Poh Koon disclosed that about 32,000 full-time workers in Singapore - or 1.7 per cent of the local workforce - take home less than \$1,300 each month.

Parliamentary Secretary for Health Rahayu Mahzam reiterated Dr Koh's point, noting at the forum that this is a small number and the PWM is effectively a minimum wage plus.

She said that while the contestation of ideas like the minimum wage can encourage more robust solutions, the process must take into account ground realities.

"We have to come to a point where we do not just keep pushing the ideology, but look at how it works in a particular context."

Progress Singapore Party (PSP) assistant secretary-general, Mr Francis Yuen, said wages are just one part of overall business costs, and the key is to raise productivity and reduce over-reliance on foreign workers.

"It should not be a system where foreign workers are brought in because they are cheap."

Gender equality

On the gender pay gap, Ms Rahayu said that resolving it does not boil down to just introducing legislation. It also requires insight into the dynamics of the workplace and rethinking women's role as primary caregivers.

"We're talking about changing mindsets and looking at how work can be made more flexible.

"It's about productivity and what one can deliver," she added, acknowledging that some women pay a "motherhood penalty" for taking time off work to care for children.

A Manpower Ministry study found that women in Singapore earned 6 per cent less than their male peers in 2018.

The 6 per cent adjusted gender pay gap is the wage difference that remains after taking into account such factors as the worker's industry, occupation, age and education.

Mr Chua noted that some multinational companies give mothers and fathers the same number of days of maternity and paternity leave.

Fathers in Singapore are entitled to two weeks of paid paternity leave.

"Perhaps this is something we can do more of," he said. "It's not just about wages, but ensuring that there is equality across some of these other dimensions as well."

Leadership succession and candidate selection

On whether the PAP would refine its process for selecting electoral candidates, Ms Rahayu pointed out that its GE2020 candidate slate reflects a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, age groups and genders.

Alluding to Mr Ivan Lim, who had been walking the ground in Jurong GRC but who withdrew his candidacy in GE2020 after allegations were made about his conduct, she said: "We realise that for whoever we put up, there's a degree of vulnerability that they are exposed to. That's something we will definitely need to look at.

"But I would call for a lot more value to be placed on what the candidate can offer."

Mr Chua said that WP chief Pritam Singh's new role as Leader of the Opposition is something the party will build on.

"It also gives Singapore the opportunity to institutionalise an opposition in Parliament and in our political system," he added.

On whether the PSP is more than just its party chief, Dr Tan Cheng Bock, Mr Yuen stressed that the party is grooming new talent and "may see very different people even in a year's time".

"The plan is not to have just one person succeeding Dr Tan but a group of people," he said, adding that the presence in Parliament of Non-Constituency MPs Hazel Poa and Leong Mun Wai, both from the PSP, will help establish the party's brand.

On the PAP's future agenda, Ms Rahayu said the Government need to not only tackle the immediate issues facing Singaporeans owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as jobs and livelihoods, but also acknowledge people's hopes and aspirations.

"We need to keep listening to, and accommodate, this growing desire for diversity of views, while strengthening the common cause and what holds us together as Singaporeans."

Correction note: An earlier version of this story said the Progress Singapore Party is against the Workers' Party proposal for a minimum wage. What PSP assistant secretary-general Francis Yuen said was wages are just one part of overall business costs, and the key is to raise productivity and reduce over-reliance on foreign workers. We are sorry for the error.