

IPS post-GE2020 forum: Minimum wage the key focus in dialogue with PAP, WP and PSP

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WP's minimum wage proposal is not "diametrically opposed" to the Progressive Wage Model, the party's Mr Chua said

PSP's Mr Yuen said the system should not allow foreigners to be preferred because of cost

On a freedom of information Act, the PAP's Ms Rahayu warned that more information may not create "meaningful" policy change

She said the PAP will constantly review its selection process for candidates but value should be placed on what they offer

The issues of a minimum wage, the hiring of foreigners and a freedom of information law emerged as key talking points at a forum on Thursday (Oct 22) where representatives of three political parties discussed the 2020 General Election (GE) and their plans.

Over about two hours, Ms Rahayu Mahzam of the People's Action Party (PAP), Mr Louis Chua of the Workers' Party (WP) and Progress Singapore Party's (PSP) assistant secretary-general Francis Yuen tackled their parties' policy positions and outlooks. The event was held by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

The hot topic of the minimum wage again took centre stage, with the WP pushing for its universal minimum wage proposal and the ruling PAP countering that the current Progressive Wage Model (PWM) was in fact a "minimum wage plus".

The forum, moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, the think tank's deputy director of research and a senior research fellow, was the last in a series of post-GE2020 forums held by the IPS.

It follows two earlier sessions where researchers presented analysis of electoral attitudes and use of media during the election. All were held via video conference and streamed live on Facebook.

MINIMUM WAGE

The three party representatives were questioned in detail about their parties' respective stances on a minimum wage.

It was a contentious issue during the July 10 GE hustings, and continued to be part of the national conversation with debates on the matter in Parliament in the following months.

WP has proposed a universal minimum wage with S\$1,300 as a base, and Mr Chua said the party wants to implement the plan immediately.

"A lot of people speak of the minimum wage and the PWM as though they are diametrically opposed concepts," said the Member of Parliament (MP) for Sengkang Group Representation Constituency (GRC).

PWM is a scheme that aims to lift workers' wages as they upgrade their skills and improve productivity. It is currently mandatory for the cleaning, security and landscape industries, but not for other sectors.

But the two are not mutually exclusive, Mr Chua said. The WP is proposing for the minimum wage to be implemented while the PWM is gradually expanded to more sectors.

Countering that, Ms Rahayu reiterated that the PWM was a “minimum wage plus” — a term previously used by other PAP leaders.

She noted that only 32,000 workers in Singapore are earning less than S\$1,300, representing 1.7 per cent of the local workforce.

Said the MP for Jurong GRC: “If we want to talk about drawing that line at that number, I really think we need to think again... How will this impact businesses? Will it hurt them? Will it cause stagnation of salaries?”

Asked whether the debate over a minimum wage was a political play, Mr Yuen said the issue was in fact practical not political.

“If you strongly believe it will hurt the company, then the Government (should) just help these 32,000 people, why don’t you just directly give it to them?” he said.

At that point, the moderator Dr Koh chimed in to add that the Government’s current Workfare schemes does provide additional support to low-wage workers.

Mr Yuen added that if a business is employing a vast number of staff below the proposed S\$1,300 minimum wage such that it cannot afford to raise their salaries, then Singapore should question whether it wants to collaborate with such a labour intensive and low wage company.

FOREIGNERS AND POPULATION

On their party’s view of the inflow of foreigners, Ms Rahayu, who is also Parliamentary Secretary for Health, said that it goes beyond filling the talent gaps in Singapore’s new industries.

“It is the message and signal that you send to other countries,” she said, adding that if foreigners’ entry is too restricted, it will lead to companies not choosing to come to Singapore and that this will ultimately harm the job prospects of Singaporeans.

She acknowledged, however, that the fact that there is unhappiness over foreign worker policies means there are areas the Government needs to target and urged Singaporeans to report any cases of potential discriminatory hiring to the Manpower Ministry.

Mr Chua said the key to solving the issue lies in figuring out why Singapore’s education system, often ranked among the top globally, is unable to provide students with the necessary skillsets to perform roles that have to be taken up by foreigners.

The PSP’s Mr Yuen said the system should not encourage foreign workers to be brought in because they’re cheaper to hire and instead find ways to incentivise companies to hire more locals.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Mr Chua said that while he was glad that the issue of minimum wage has generated a lot of debate, implementing a freedom of information Act would help ensure discussions based on facts and evidence.

Many questions filed in Parliament are requests for data, he said. If there were better access to data, more members of the public could propose policy ideas and even highlight issues missed by parliamentarians.

Agreeing, Mr Yuen added: “If you don’t have the right information, you can’t even formulate the problems, let alone the ideas.”

But Ms Rahayu said the issue is not about whether information is available but how information is interpreted.

She added that the Government is trying its “very best” to publish information online so that people can understand why it makes certain decisions.

“It has to be (done) in a meaningful manner, not a free-for-all where you end up having loose information out there and people interpreting it and causing a lot of buzz without actually meaningfully changing policies.”

PARTY’S PLANS

As for the party’s plans for the future, Mr Chua said that the WP will continue to face resource challenges as it runs primarily on volunteers, but that the formalising of the Leader of the Opposition role will hopefully institutionalise the opposition in Singapore.

Meanwhile, the PSP — as a new party founded by former PAP MP Tan Cheng Bock — will work towards building a brand that moves beyond just its founder.

“The plan is not going to be one person succeeding Dr Tan, it’s (going to be) a group of people that will continue to carry the flag,” Mr Yuen said.

Ms Rahayu was asked what she thought of the last-minute substitution of a candidate in her Jurong GRC team, in reference to former candidate Ivan Lim who withdrew his candidacy following online criticisms of his character.

She acknowledged limitations in some of the PAP’s selection processes, which the party will constantly review, but noted the challenges faced by all candidates who are inevitably vulnerable to public scrutiny.

“I would call for a lot more value placed in what the candidate can give and offer,” she said. “We are always expected to be whiter than white and that’s not always so straightforward.”