



## Protecting the Most Vulnerable Workers in Singapore

**Government, labor, industry and non-governmental groups work to ensure safe and fair employment for low-wage foreign workers**

By Bill Poorman

Even if you're new to Singapore, you likely already know that the city state relies heavily on labor from neighboring Asian countries to help the economy and society run. Male migrant workers often build and maintain much of the city's buildings and infrastructure and work in other important industries. Women migrant workers often work as live-in maids in the homes of higher-paid expats and Singaporeans. Of the 5.6 million people in Singapore, about 230,000 work as maids – or foreign domestic workers (FDW) – while about 690,000 work in the construction, marine and offshore engineering fields.

The Ministry of Manpower sets a variety of laws regulating and protecting these workers, some of which are complex. But altogether, as general rules, two things are true about migrant workers in Singapore:

One, should these workers lose their jobs – unfairly or not – they have a very short amount of time to find another one before they have to leave the country.

And two, these workers have far less wealth and earn far lower pay than other workers here, which means they have fewer resources to advocate for themselves.

Both of these facts make them more vulnerable to exploitation than other workers.

Most employers are perfectly reasonable, both in the corporate and domestic sectors. But if you follow the news, you eventually learn the ways in which these workers can struggle. Many often pay high fees to agents just to come to Singapore. Sometimes the promise of work disappears once they arrive here. Construction workers can get injured. Others are never paid their wages. FDWs are sometimes abused by their employers. Some have been starved, while others are assaulted. In rare cases, the abuse is so bad, they commit suicide.

Thankfully, both government and non-government organizations have stepped into the breach. The Singapore government has regulations for foreign workers and brings criminal cases against abusive employers. The workers' home countries set some regulations, like minimum pay requirements.

In the non-government sector, three groups assist and advocate for lower wage workers.

The Migrant Workers' Centre is a joint project of the main union organization in Singapore, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and the main employer's organization, the Singapore National Employers Federation. Started in 2009, among its variety of services it runs a dorm for workers who are in a dispute with their employer, employs an emergency response team, and finds ways to promote appreciation for foreign workers.

Two other civil society organizations that advocate for and assist migrant workers are Transient Workers Count, Too (TWC2), which got its start in 2003, and the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), which was founded a year later. Both offer a variety of services to foreign workers who are facing crises. Among them are providing food, shelter and advice on their rights under the law. They also work to change the law. For example, in 2013, domestic workers were supposed to start receiving a mandatory day off per week, even if later surveys by the same groups showed a significant portion of employers weren't following the law yet.

Much progress has been made in assisting migrant workers in Singapore, but at this point, help is still needed for the most vulnerable. If you're inspired to take part, all three of these non-governmental organizations offer opportunities for volunteering across a variety of tasks. All three also accept donations, giving you a number of ways to help ensure that all workers in Singapore have a just and safe workplace.

*Bill Poorman is a writer who has lived in Singapore for three years. In the interest of full disclosure, Bill volunteers for TWC2 periodically.*

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