

Caught up in policy gaps: distressed communities of South-Asian migrant workers in Little India, Singapore

Geerhardt Kornatowski*

Migrant workers are considered to be a vital source of cheap labour to Singapore's economy and their temporary status, including housing, work and personal time is highly regulated throughout their stay. While such regulatory practices have been the focus of several researches, less has been documented on those that have fallen out of direct reach of the migrant worker regime and their actual living conditions. This study examines in a relational manner the daily living conditions of South-Asian 'regular workers' ('work permit holders') in their workplace and 'irregular workers' ('special pass holders') who are seeking refuge due to trouble with their employer. Particular attention will be given to the distressed living conditions and how these are addressed by a non-governmental organization in Little India.

The 2013 riot in Little India was a rare incident of public disorder in Singapore's otherwise known well-ordered society (Neo, 2015). While official accounts blamed excessive misuse of alcohol as the source of the violent outbreak, the incident did generate discussion on the daily working and living conditions of foreign workers in general. In response, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), which is in charge of foreign labour matters, immediately issued a statement, arguing that although there is always room for improvement, there was no ground to believe that foreign workers are facing 'systematic abuse' (Deccan Herald, 2014) and that the vast majority of workers was satisfied with their overall situation (Salleh, 2014). 'Only a fraction lodged complaints in 2013,' being less than 1 percent of the total of 700,000 foreign workers staying in Singapore, official numbers argued.

However, foreign labour, especially imported non- and semi-skilled labour, has always been subjected to relatively unfavourable conditions.

*Address for correspondence: Geerhardt Kornatowski, Osaka City University, Osaka, Japan;
email: g-kornatowski@ur-plaza.osaka-cu.ac.jp

The foreign labour regime itself exemplifies this in a rather straightforward way (Yeoh, 2006). Broadly speaking, foreign labour is divided into 'foreign talent' and 'foreign workers'. 'Foreign talent' is composed of foreign skilled professionals who receive a minimum income of S\$3300.¹ They are issued with an 'employment pass' and are potential residents as they are eligible to acquire permanent residence.² In order to sustain future economic growth, Singapore puts a lot of effort into attracting this pool of 'global talent' (Ong, 2014: 445) and making it part of its 'metropolitan bourgeoisie' (Khondker, 2008: 48). It is safe to say that this category benefits greatly from Singapore's prime urban environment, especially in terms of career opportunities, housing and access to leisure (See also Yeoh and Chang, 2001: 1029–1032).

The category of 'foreign workers' on the other hand is subjected to various kinds of restrictions and control. Being a pool of low-skilled labour, these workers are issued with a 'work permit' and are employed only in the construction, manufacturing, marine, process or services sectors. Their numbers are highly regulated through a levy and dependency ratio system calculated in such a way as to prevent Singaporeans being priced out of the job market (Ong, 2014). In contrast to 'foreign talent', this category is not eligible for citizenship and has to be accommodated in dormitories provided by the employer. There is no minimum salary requirement, but their salary should not exceed S\$2200. Nevertheless, local Singaporeans (especially in the lower socio-economic brackets) tend to demonstrate a hostile approach towards this category because they feel that low-cost foreign labour has contributed to a continuous suppression of wages (Chib, Wilkin, and Hua, 2013: 20).

This paper picks up the issue of 'systematic abuse' in the case of South-Asian foreign workers. Instead of considering it in technical terms in which the number of officially lodged complaints counts, it will focus on the particular struggles that arise from policy gaps in both the workplace, when the worker is employed, and the place of residence, after he has left his employer. As such, I seek to illuminate how policy shortcomings manifest themselves in the worker's daily life and how this affects his actual living conditions in the urban context of Singapore by examining the care activities provided by the NGO 'Transit Workers Count Too (TWC2)' in Little India. TWC2 is one of the few organizations that addresses the plight of South-Asian foreign workers when they run into problems with their employer.³

1 S\$1.00 = US\$0.73 (July 2015).

2 In case of employment pass holders, applications for permanent residence can already be undertaken after six months of employment in Singapore.

3 I was engaged as a volunteer in TWC2 for the period of August–October 2013. However, the views in this article are entirely mine.

Conceptual framework

Ever since Singapore's independence in 1965, the state has been a crucial actor in its remarkable trajectory of fast economic growth. To realize such exceptional growth, it has been highly dependent on foreign capital for major sources of investment and employment (see, for example, [Ermisch and Huff, 1999](#)). One vital element in making Singapore attractive to transnational capital and secure growth has been its diligent labour force and therefore the labour market has always been the target for strict state regulation ([Lim, 2012](#): 694). The use of foreign labour, then, can be seen as a deliberate strategy to secure access to 'cheap' labour and enable the economy to 'grow beyond what [Singapore's] indigenous resources can produce' ([Ong, 2014](#): 445).

Within this context, thus, I will address the foreign worker issue as an issue of precarious labour. To identify the particular struggles on the part of this kind of labour, I use [Harvey's \(1982\)](#) concept of the struggle of labour in advanced capitalist urban societies. Broadly speaking, these are (i) the struggle in the workplace (on the conditions of labour) and (ii) the struggle in the place of residence (on the conditions of social reproduction). They result from the domination of capital over labour, which is imperative to the capitalist mode of production and this domination extends beyond the workplace (where profits are produced—in the form of 'exploitation') into the place of residence (where profits are realized—in the form of 'appropriation', or what Harvey calls 'secondary forms of exploitation') in order to square the circle between production and consumption. As such, extensive regulatory practices of labour become crucial to sustain this circle.

Both struggles are inherently spatial in character as well, following the common spatial separation of labour's workplace and place of residence (living place). So there are two *seemingly* independent struggles: one operates around the wage rate and conditions of work and the other one is fought out against 'secondary forms of exploitation', such as high rents and pricey energy bills. However, Harvey points out that these struggles are interrelated (for example higher rents may incur higher wages and vice versa) and that capital in general may switch parts between stakeholders in its own interest to secure accumulation ('for the sake of accumulation'). The important implication follows that labour has to reproduce according to these conditions imposed by capital and that capital becomes, problematically, 'the only proactive social agent in shaping the urban landscape' ([Herod, 1994](#): 682). One might thus question such passive and merely reactionary agency of labour that is conceived in Harvey's concept'. Yet, I consider this rendering of passive labour the exact purpose of Singapore's foreign labour regime which is hard to counter without any help from third-party interest groups, such as advocacy groups and NGOs.

By using Harvey's framework outlined above, I examine how foreign workers in Singapore experience these struggles, how these relate to the state's pro-business foreign labour policy and how these are mediated by TWC2. In order to deal with the spatial implications, I make a clear separation between 'regular workers' ('work permit' holders) and 'irregular workers' ('special pass' holders). This means that in the case of 'regular workers' I consider the dormitory-style accommodation to be part of the workplace, because the worker has no other option but to accept the accommodation provided by his employer, and also quite often such accommodation is provided on-site. In this sense, it is an extension of the workplace. A clear spatial separation, however, can be seen in the case of 'irregular workers', after they had to abandon their dormitories and make the move into Singapore's central urban areas in order to find alternative forms of accommodation. From this point, they become entangled in a specific struggle on their living conditions, which will be taken up later in this paper.

The role of rent is crucial in this struggle too as, Harvey argues, 'landlords typically try to extract as much rent as possible for the housing stock they own' (Harvey, 1982: 548). In order to escape/reduce these 'monopoly rents', access to (affordable) forms of transportation become important (*Ibid.*: 549). However, as perfect spatial mobility is somewhat of an illusion, especially for but not only low-income classes, capital in general now and then throws in its weight to balance the struggle, which in this case is between landed property and labour (*Ibid.*: 550). We can understand this from the interaction between the cost of living and the wage rate because the cost of living may increase the wage rate (=cost reproduction of labour) (*Ibid.*: 552–553). One way to understand Singapore's specific regulations on accommodation for foreign workers, then, is to keep the foreign workforce out of the private/public housing market, so as to prevent any possible rent spikes (which would be perceived detrimental to the local population) and consequent increases in the wage rate necessary to afford these spikes. It also works the other way. As most Singaporeans own their housing, any dormitory construction project in the vicinity of residential areas would meet with strong community resistance (Kong, 2008), for the reason that the value of their housing maybe negatively influenced just by the presence of foreign workers. We first turn to the particular struggles experienced in the workplace to understand the common regulatory practices.

Struggle in the workplace

As noted above, the workplace of the foreign worker extends to and includes his living place, which is a bed-space in a shared dormitory room.

Thus, in order to identify the struggles these workers face, I will look at both the work site and the workers' accommodation in its totality. In order to make sense of the struggles, it is important to understand the worker's social position in which she/he⁴ arrives in Singapore.

Coming to Singapore

The opportunity to work in Singapore is a much-sought after *commodity*, given the finite supply of work permits (TWC2 2012: 8). In order to come to work in Singapore, the worker has to pay an intermediary to arrange his contract. This is usually an employment agency but could also be a training centre or fellow foreign worker. The average fee for South-Asian workers from India and Bangladesh is roughly S\$4500⁵ (TWC2 2013: 26). Part of this fee covers the worker's basic skill training, which is obligatory in order to take on work in e.g. the construction sector. These costs are fairly high, because of the common practice of employment agencies paying out fees to the employer in order to land a work permit contract. These fees are eventually imposed on the worker himself (Chan, 2013). The actual training is provided in a training centre in the worker's country of origin for about one month or more to learn the required skills for his work.

To cover these expensive costs, the worker ('s family) commonly has to go into debt and/or sell its assets such as land. It is an urban-bound migration process as the workers are usually recruited in particular rural areas. Most of them have completed formal secondary education (*Ibid.*: 17).

When the worker arrives in Singapore, he goes for a medical check-up and attends courses etc. that are required by MOM. After that, the worker will be tied to his employer for the entire period of employment and he cannot seek a change of employer, unless he returns to his country of origin and starts the procedure over again. Also, once the work permit is cancelled at, e.g. the end of his contract, the worker must be repatriated after outstanding employment claims (like salary arrears) are settled.

The employer on his side is required to pay the monthly levy, purchase work injury compensation insurance and put down a S\$5,000 security bond for each worker.⁶ In addition, he has to provide accommodation, meals, transport to the site of work and repatriation expenses once the contract terminates. Contracts are mostly made on a yearly basis, and extension is possible within the requirements of the project the employer is

4 Migrant workers maybe male or female: we use the term 'he' in a non-gender specific way.

5 For Bangladeshi this is S\$5605 and for Indian S\$3885 (trimmed mean).

6 The levy amount for a South-Asian low-skilled foreign worker in the construction sector for example is S\$550.

executing. However, he has the right unilaterally to terminate the contract if he deems it necessary.

Foreign labour as a source of profit

It is clear that the worker arrives in Singapore in a weak social position due to the fact that he has gone into debt in order to make this move. Once he starts working, his salary on average is about S\$850, including a daily 3–7 hours of overtime (TWC2 2013: 27–28). So in order to repay his outstanding debts, he would need theoretically to work five full months, but in reality he spends more than a year of working to clear his debts when we include his living expenses, remittances and other related costs (*Ibid.*: 29). In other words, it is a financial imperative for the worker to remain employed for at least one year.

Before we look into the specificities of the struggle the worker faces, we need to consider how the foreign worker is able to produce profit ('surplus value') to his employer. As pointed out in the conceptual framework, in theory this happens through cost-effective labour performance, i.e. keeping wages low, subjecting the worker to an intensive workplace and extending the work day, preferably without the payment of overtime work. Common struggles, then, are waged against long working hours, no days-off, and unpaid (overtime) salaries, all of which are frequently reported upon by the workers. Yet, in the context of Singapore, different forces seem to be at play because labour costs for foreign and local workers tend to even out after additional expenditures such as levies, the provision of accommodation, and meals are included in the equation (Ong, 2014: 446). So how is it then that foreign workers are turned into a pool of cheap labour? By exploring this question, we can identify the rationale for particular strategies on the side of the employer that cause the worker to get caught up in specific struggles in the workplace.

'Kickbacks and profiteering'

'Workers are typically not privy to information about whether a portion of their intermediary fee is passed to their employer.' (TWC2 2012: 1).

The necessity to recover the incurred debt makes the foreign worker not just a 'more compliant, diligent and stable worker' (Ong, 2014: 446), but also a 'vulnerable one' (Ye, 2014: 1019). This paves the way for all kinds of predatory practices on his salary. The high intermediary fee plays a crucial role in this. Because the employer has extremely easy access to labour due to the high demand for Singapore jobs, employment agencies find themselves in fierce competition with each other and in practice offer kickbacks (bribes) to employers in order to secure contracts (TWC2 2012: 12). The

costs of this 'market practice' are then shifted to the worker himself, which means that he actually purchases his job. This partially explains the exorbitant agent fee rates imposed on the worker.

As a debt-incumbent, and thus diligent worker, he then is prone to several forms of salary deductions, which are mostly illegal in nature. Indeed, several accounts show that employer-related costs are recovered through salary deductions, and that contract renewals are directly negotiated with the worker in the form of kickbacks (see also [Ong, 2014: 447](#)). Another factor contributing to the worker's weak position is the location of his accommodation. Finding himself in an isolated setting far into the city's periphery, access to governmental services and/or help provided by NGOs is rendered difficult. Such a state of spatial immobility out of the workplace adds to a general lack of awareness of these kinds of services ([Chib *et al.*, 2013: 22](#)). One of the few chances to escape this status-quo is when the worker visits Little India on his day off (see next section).

It is worth mentioning here that these practices by what one could call 'malicious employers' are not merely the result of their bad intent. In the context of fierce market competition, for example in the construction sector, these are very much also structural outcomes in connection to Singapore's 'multi-level subcontracting' system in which small-scale contractors must keep their bids competitive ([Ofori and Yaw, 1998: 404–405](#); [Yaw and Ofori, 2001: 158–159](#); [Ong, 2014: 448–449](#)). Indeed, the high turnover rate of foreign workers due to the lucrative practice of securing new contracts (and thus kickbacks) has caused an overall side-effect of low labour productivity in the sector as there is a structural lack of continuous investment in foreign workers' skills training ([Mao *et al.*, 2003: 716](#)). A way to counter this low productivity, then, is by subjecting the worker to the kinds of illegal deductions mentioned above.⁷

Struggles in the place of residence

The struggle after the worker leaves the workplace takes on a different character. Whereas the struggle in the workplace pits the worker against the employer in regard to his labour cost conditions, the struggle in the place of residence is manifold and relates directly to his capacity to consume. However, in case the worker has made an official claim at MOM, this capacity is heavily circumvented as result of existing regulation. Since

7 It is illustrative that illegal practices are more rampant among lower-tier subcontractors. Although more empirical work is needed on this subject, large contractors are genuinely known to take proper care of their workers and also look after their well-being.

the worker cannot operate on his work permit anymore, he is issued a 'special pass', which grants him the permission to stay in Singapore until his claims are settled. Although he is allowed to stay, he loses his right to work, and therefore any (legal) chance of income. The reason for this is that under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act, the employer is normally required to accommodate the worker and payout his wages or medical claims until an agreement between both parties is reached. However in reality this is rarely the case due to the troubled relation between both parties, and thus the worker is more than often left to his own resources. This then also makes him prone to take up illegal jobs, which is strictly forbidden and heavily sanctioned in Singapore.

Claim procedures and setbacks

The critical moment to reach out for help is when the employer is holding back wages or refuses to bear the cost for medical treatment of work-related accidents. It is often at this moment, in conjunction with the fear of getting forcefully repatriated that the worker abandons his workplace and moves into Singapore's inner city, and in particular into Little India.

The Singapore Government provides complaint channels for foreign workers who suffer from employment-related malpractices or injuries. Most make use of MOM's Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA), which deals with all issues relating to work accidents such as insurance payouts, medical expenses and medical leave wages. Compensation is based on the degree of disability (known as 'permanent incapacity') the worker suffers as a result of his injury (not the amount he has lost due to the inability to work: [TWC2 2013](#): 29). The typical waiting period for a compensation payout is six to twelve months. In the case of severe injury, the worker maybe rendered unable to resume a regular working life even after he is compensated.

However, despite the relative ease in accessing these government services, once the worker is able to access Little India, there are frequent possibilities for appropriative interventions from third parties, which constantly obstruct the smooth running of this process. In the end, the worker may find himself unable to break free from his precarious situation and thus remain financially indebted. I exemplify this by using the official WICA claims process as summarized in Table 1.

Distressed living conditions

The continuous uncertainty on part of the worker as to whether he will be able to reclaim his medical expenses (or salary arrears), whether the amount will be sufficient to cover his period of non-activity and whether he will be able to retain it for himself may cause him immense hardship. In

Table 1 The WICA claims process and possible obstructions based on MOM’s guidelines for injured workers (www.mom.gov.sg)

WICA claims process		
Steps	Instructions	Possible obstructions
1 Inform employer about accident	The employer will notify MOM about the worker’s accident If the worker wishes so, he can keep MOM informed by filling an online form After being notified of the accident, MOM will contact the worker and send him an application form	Employer files for an off-site accident Employer misinforms the doctor to avoid payment to the worker Lawyers step in between to obstruct the worker to go to MOM and collect fees
2 File claim	The worker has up to one year from the accident to return the application form to MOM Attend all medical appointments	
3 Go for medical assessment	After the injury stabilizes, the treating hospital will assess and inform MOM of the extent of the injury (i.e. % permanent Incapacity)	The assessment does not match the ‘place/severity of the injury (misinformation by employer) and compensation is withheld
4 Receipt of notice assessment	MOM computes the compensation amount and issues a Notice of Assessment to the worker, the employer and the insurer	The result of the assessment takes too long and savings become a problem (need to borrow from family or colleague workers)
5 Resolution of claim and payment	If no one objects to MOM’s assessment, the employer/insurer is to pay the worker within twenty-one days of the Notice If there is objection, MOM will facilitate to resolve it	The amount of compensation is too low or/and gets appropriated by loan sharks (agents etc.)

the course of waiting for his final assessment, however, he is in need for accommodation as well. One of the few accessible forms of housing are the traditional two-story shop houses in Little India, which are accessed through information in the streets or coffee houses. These are often subdivided shared cubicles installed in the upper floor of the shop house.⁸ Rents tend to vary from S\$150 to S\$350, depending on the availability of air-conditioning etc. (TWC2 2013: 35). In comparison, a dormitory bed-space would amount to S\$104 on average, including utility costs (*Ibid.*: 34).

The actual size of living space the worker can secure for himself is extremely small, which makes the rent in reality unreasonably high. Indeed, these small cubicles are usually crammed with three bunkbeds (bedspaces for six persons), or may just be a floor space in a large room. The fact that this kind of housing is shared with other workers who are in

8 Similar housing is available Geylang, which is also part of Singapore’s inner city. This area however is generally preferred by Chinese foreign workers.

a similar situation creates a rather tense and distressed atmosphere. Whereas the shared rooms in dormitories often create a sphere of camaraderie, there is less interaction between the workers, especially among the different rooms. Overcrowding is the most difficult situation to deal with as amenities have to be shared among on average of twenty workers (TWC2 2013: 36). Hygienic conditions (such as bedbugs) are often poor and there are no means to protect personal belongings. Since the rooms are subdivided, most of the cubicles do not have a window, making them poorly ventilated as well.

Rent is paid from the worker's own money, medical wages or/and savings, borrowed from lawyers, from family and friends (*Ibid.*: 35). The landlord, often the main tenant of the shop house floor, collects the rent himself or through his associates. Apart from this there is almost no interaction between both parties. In almost all cases, the landlord takes in tenants that share the same ethnic background as sharing between Bangladeshis and Indians seems to be troublesome due to cultural differences. As such, there is a sense of spatial segregation among the foreign workers even within the small confines of Little India.

It is unclear at this moment how this housing resource will evolve. Rents are reported to be rising incrementally and several shop houses have been subjected to police raids. This has to do with fact that Little India is a preserved historical district and a hot spot for tourism (Chang, 2000; Henderson, 2008). In an overlapping way, however, it is also a place of refuge for foreign workers. The area in general is favoured by South-Asian foreign workers because of the presence of religious facilities, close proximity to hospitals, lawyer firms and MOM's office. It is also a place for social networking among workers on their limited days-off (mostly on Sundays), and to remit money back home.⁹ What this means it that foreign workers will most likely continue to depend on this area as Little India also represents to them one of very few forms of spatial mobility available in Singapore. However, because of the distressed conditions discussed in this section, there is an obvious need for specialized social (care) intervention beyond the confines of traditional government channels.

Care efforts in Little India

In response to the policy shortcomings outlined above, a few support organizations have stepped in to provide essential care and professional

⁹ Every Sunday about 30,000 South-Asian foreign workers make their way to Little India, adding to the congested character of this area (Chang, 2000).

consultation. While in most developed countries voluntary networks providing care for the disadvantaged are a common phenomenon, this is hardly the case for Singapore. Indeed, civil society in Singapore remains rather underdeveloped as the state takes on all responsibility for the nation's well-being in order to 'act rationally in the interest of the collective good' (Khondker, 2008: 49). In this sense there should, in theory at least, be no need for voluntary organizations to provide welfare-related care, etc. Another fact is that in the past the state has been extremely suspicious towards any kind of organized social initiatives¹⁰ and there has certainly been little space for the development of professional community organizing interventions. However, some recent developments point to a different direction as forms of partnerships between the government and NGO seem gradually to be emerging.¹¹

A specific feature of civil society actors in Singapore is thus their overall framing of activism as cooperative with the state, remaining within the bounds of what is deemed socially and politically acceptable (Lyons, 2005). In the case of TWC2 as well, their previous activism for foreign domestic worker rights did not target the state and the capitalist system in a direct way but rather sought to find ways to improve employer mentality as better citizens towards their workers, something which would benefit society as a whole (*Ibid.*: 104). I would claim this remains the case regarding their current activism for 'irregular' foreign workers. Although state (MOM) policy is the direct target of TWC2's critical activities, the organization takes on a cooperative approach towards foreign labour policy improvement, and even general economical concerns such as the recent issue of low labour productivity are addressed in a constructive manner.¹² Such a 'cooperative' approach appears to result in a positive affirmation of

10 See Barr (2010), for an extensive account on how social justice activism (including demands for better wages) by the Catholic Church was crushed in the 1980s as an act to preserve the state's authoritarianism. The important result was that it effectively deterred any similar future social activities and held civil society down. What is worth to mention is that the incident took place in Geylang (see footnote 8).

11 See Lyons (2005) for an elaboration on the government's recent engagement with the 'new society experiment'. The registration of TWC2 as an advocacy group under the Registrar of Societies in 2004 was seen as a significant step in this evolution. To my knowledge, the most recent example of the government entering into partnerships with NGOs would be the shelter management system for homeless families (e.g. Basu, 2010).

12 The following segment from TWC2's set of recommendations exemplifies this well: 'It is plainly the case that enhanced productivity requires not only training, but also the retention of workers in order that the benefits of training can be reaped by Singapore as a host society. Enlightened employers will see the value in training migrant workers as part of a concerted national productivity drive, but TWC2 believes the government can do more to incentivise employers towards such forward-thinking behaviour and to retain experienced, more productive workers.' (TWC2, 2014, p.2).

TCW2's support activities as MOM now occasionally refers troubled workers to seek first-hand support from TWC2.¹³

TWC2's care activities for 'irregular' South-Asian foreign workers in Little India are pivoted around a meals programme ('Cuff Road Project—TCRP') and a day drop-in centre ('Dibashram'). The meals programme, which started in 2008, currently caters for 200–350 workers on a daily basis. Mostly volunteers manage the provision of these meals, by rotating between two restaurants, one serving Bangladeshi cuisine and the other one Indian. Although the volunteers are informed beforehand on the specific needs and handling procedures of the foreign workers, they gradually develop expertise through frequent practice. The drop-in centre on the other hand serves as a point of staff gathering and temporal refuge place for the workers. TCRP serves as an opportunity to provide basic consultation/advice for each individual case. This also involves referral-making to government (MOM) services and follow-up services with hospital appointments. All the workers that participate in TCRP are registered and keep a meals card ('*makan* card') in order to monitor how frequently the worker participates. In addition, the cards contain basic information on the worker's case so that each volunteer can immediately assess his situation.

In regard to TWC2's advocacy activities, data for research work are collected through this meal programme, mostly by interviewing participating workers on a voluntary basis. While it is beyond the organization's capacity to intervene in the distressed housing (living) conditions, TCRP and the drop-in centre do become *in situ* spaces of a form of care, which, especially for the 'irregular' workers is of crucial importance to sustain their livelihood outside the workplace.¹⁴

Conclusion

By using Harvey's concept of the double struggle of labour, this article has explored and conceptualized the particular forms of 'systematic abuse' to which foreign labour in Singapore is subjected to. These forms are structural in character as they are sources for the production and realization of surplus value, even if they are illegal in form. While official regulation is also designed to protect the worker from illegal practices, the conflicting interests of the worker and employer in general tend to play out in favour

13 This was pointed out to me by a TWC2 regular staff member. This fact exemplifies that TWC2 and MOM's relation is not merely confrontational.

14 It should also be mentioned that religious facilities such as temples also provide spaces of refuge for foreign workers. There are also some charity activities (such as handing out food) by religious organizations on a regular basis.

of the employer (see also [Neo, 2015](#)), as witnessed in the government's overall poor level of regulation enforcement ([Ong, 2014](#)). Due to the debt factor, the worker remains in a vulnerable position to all of this.

The specific struggle of foreign labour in Singapore has an overtly spatial character as well. Whereas 'regular workers' are confined to stringent labour control in the outskirts of the city, hidden from Singapore's main society's purview, 'irregular workers' have few options but to rely on the housing environment in Little India. In this sense, the foreign labour issue is as much an issue of spatial justice as it is of foreign worker rights in general ([Neo, 2015](#)). On the other hand, the case of Little India also provides a counterweight to the *in situ* exploitive practices by third parties and distressed living conditions. While we only have discussed the activities of TWC2 in this article, such forms of (directly accessible) care provided in inner city areas prove to be of utmost importance. Any form of engagement with policy however needs to address the structural issues faced by the workers both in the workplace and place of residence. From a community development perspective, the highly individualizing circumstances of workers, and divisions based on worker status, ethnicity, religion and so on, as well as the overt hostility of the Singaporean state to any 'political activism not sanctioned by it, makes the move from individual casework and support to broader forms of organizing highly problematic'.¹⁵ This would require fundamental shifts in the structure of Singaporean society.

Geerhardt Komatowski is Assistant Professor, Osaka City University, Osaka, Japan.

References

-
- Barr, D. B. (2010) Marxists in Singapore? Lee Kuan Yew's campaign against Catholic Social Justice Activists in the 1980s, *Critical Asian Studies*, **42** (3), 335–362.
- Basu, R. (2010) Number of homeless people doubles, *The Sunday Times*, 31 January.
- Chan, A. (2013) *Hired on Sufferance: China's Migrant Workers in Singapore*, China Bulletin Research Reports, Hong Kong.
- Chang, T. C. (2000) Singapore's Little India: a tourist attraction as a contested landscape, *Urban Studies*, **37** (2), 343–366.
- Chib, A., Wilkin, H. A. and Hua, S. R. M. (2013) International migrant workers' use of mobile phones to seek social support in Singapore, *Information Technologies and International Development*, **9** (4), 19–34.
-

¹⁵ This is not a problem only faced by migrant workers and organizations in Singapore, of course. See [Waite et al., 2015](#).

- Deccan Herald (2014) Allegations of foreign worker abuse baseless: Singapore Minister. Deccan Herald, [Online] 23 January. Accessed at: www.deccanherald.com. (11 September 2015).
- Ermisch, J. F. and Huff, W. G. (1999) Hypergrowth in an East Asian NIC: public policy and capital accumulation in Singapore, *World Development*, **27** (1), 21–38.
- Harvey, D. (1982) Labour, Capital, and Class Struggle Around the Built Environment in Advanced Capitalist Societies, in A. Giddens and D. Held, eds, *Classes, Power, and Conflict: Classical and Contemporary Debates*, The MacMillan Press Ltd, London, pp. 545–561.
- Henderson, J. C. (2008) Managing urban ethnic heritage: Little India in Singapore, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, **14** (4), 332–346.
- Herod, A. (1994) On workers' theoretical (in)visibility in the writing of critical urban geography: a comradely critique, *Urban Geography*, **15** (7), 681–693.
- Khondker, H. H. (2008) Globalization and state autonomy in Singapore, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, **36**, 35–56.
- Kong, M. (2008) Economic Globalization and Transnationalizing Labour: Thai Construction Workers in Singapore, Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. University of Singapore, Singapore.
- Lim, K. F. (2012) The point is to keep going: the global sub-prime mortgage crisis, local labour market repositioning, and the capital accumulation dynamic in Singapore, *Journal of Economic Geography*, **12**, 693–716.
- Lyons, L. (2005) Transient workers count too? the intersection of citizenship and gender in Singapore's civil society, *SOUJOURN*, **20** (2), 208–248.
- Mao, Z., Hua, G. B., Wang, S. Q., et al. (2003) Total factor productivity growth accounting in the construction industry of Singapore, *Construction Management and Economics*, **21**, 707–718.
- Neo, J. (2015) Riots and rights: law and exclusion in Singapore's migrant worker regime, *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, **2** (1), 137–168.
- Ofori, G. and Yaw, D. (1998) Flexible management of workers: review of employment practices in the construction industry in Singapore, *Construction Management and Economics*, **16**, 397–408.
- Ong, Y. (2014) Singapore's phantom workers, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, **4** (3), 443–463.
- Salleh, N. A. M. (2014) Little India riot: survey by MOM, MWC shows foreign worker satisfaction levels remain high. The Straits Times. [Online] 7 July. Accessed at: <http://www.straitstimes.com>. (11 September 2015).
- TWC2 (2012) *Worse off for working? Kickbacks, intermediary fees and migrant construction workers in Singapore*, transit workers count too, accessed at: http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Worse-off-for-working_initial-report_v2.pdf (10 June 2015).
- TWC2 (2013) *Migrant Worker Housing: A Survey of Men in TWC2's Cuff Road Project*, Transient Workers Count Too, Singapore.
- TWC2 (2014), *TWC2's recommendations for Singapore budget 2014: towards a more productive economy and a well-integrated society through sustainable foreign labour policies*, transient workers count too, accessed at: <http://twc2.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/TWC2s-Recommendations-for-Singapore-Budget-2014.pdf> (10 June 2015).

- Waite, L., Craig, G., Lewis, H and Skrivankova, K., eds, (2015) *Vulnerability, Exploitation and Migrants*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.
- Yaw, B. and Ofori, G. (2001) Subcontracting, foreign workers and job safety in the Singapore construction industry, *Asia Pacific Business Review*, **8** (1), 145–166.
- Ye, J. (2014) Migrant masculinities: Bangladeshi men in Singapore's labour force, *Gender, Politics and Culture*, **21** (8), 1012–1028.
- Yeoh, B. (2006) Bifurcated labour: the unequal incorporation of transmigrants in Singapore, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Social Geografie*, **97** (1), 26–37.
- Yeoh, B. and Chang, T. C. (2001) Globalising Singapore: debating transnational flows in the city, *Urban Studies*, **38** (7), 1025–1044.