

Transient Workers Count Too
2013 Annual General Meeting

Committee Report

Management Committee

Russell Heng	President
Noorashikin Abdul Rahman	Vice-President
Alex Au	Treasurer
Yew Kong Leong	Secretary
Roderick Chia	Member
Debbie Fordyce	Member
John Gee	Member
Shelley Thio	Member
Wang Eng Eng	Member

Subcommittee Heads

Research	John Gee
Direct Services	Debbie Fordyce
Communications	Alex Au
Fundraising	Russell Heng
Human Resource	Russell Heng

Staff

Kenneth Soh	Social Worker
Raymond Ang	Social Worker
Christine Sculley	Admin Officer
Christina Chng	Accounts Officer

Over the course of each year, TWC2 engages in a wide variety of activities that either directly or indirectly support our objectives as an NGO concerned about the condition of migrant workers in Singapore, whether or not this is through the direct provision of assistance to workers in need, through research or engaging interested parties like government agencies and employers/employment agencies; or through public education.

This committee report provides an overview of some of these activities in 2012.

It is divided into two main sections: activities that took place around the organization's core areas of direct services, research, and advocacy; and the various organizational matters that supported these activities — engagement with partners, fundraising, human resource issues, and communications.

PART I: CORE AREAS

Direct Services

In 2012, as in previous years, the provision of direct services to individuals concerned about migrant workers in Singapore remained one of the main areas of activity for TWC2. These include direct assistance to the foreign workers themselves as well as providing advice to employers and communicating with members of the public. We continued to use a combination of our helpdesk at the Cuff Road Project restaurant and telephone helpline. Because of these specific modes of contact as well as the main locations we focus on, we saw certain patterns in terms of the nationality of workers we helped as well as the nature of the problems they faced. In 2012, the bulk of male workers we assisted came from Bangladesh, China and India, and the three main groups of female workers were from the Philippines, China and Indonesia. The top three specific issues faced by male workers were injury cases, salary matters and overstaying, and for female workers they were salary matters, disputes with employers and issues over employer transfer.

Here are some important 2012 figures at a glance:

1. We assisted 2825 workers (2686 male, 139 female). This is the highest number for any year, exceeding the last highest year (2009) by 383
2. Since 2007 we have 10,256 workers
3. Our social workers worked on 653 cases (139 female, 514 male) in 2012
4. For male workers 60% of the reported cases were injury cases, 20% salary matters and 10% were overstayers, among other cases
5. For female workers 25% of the reported cases were salary matters, 21% were disputes with employers and 13% were employer transfer issues, among other cases. However, 15% of the issues faced by female workers fell into the miscellaneous category.

The Cuff Road Project continues to remain a central platform of TWC2's direct services programmes. Apart from using it as a way of reaching out to and assisting migrant workers facing hardship, it is an important humanitarian gesture for us because many attendees do not have the means to financially support themselves and are therefore have little access to a basic right, which is

food. In 2012 the Cuff Road Project continued to provide free meals to these workers at the Isthana Restaurant and Alankar Restaurant in Little India. We stopped using Sutha's, which was the original establishment the Cuff Road Project operated out of.

Some Cuff Road Project figures:

1. In 2012 we served 101,819 meals. This puts the total number of meals served at 362,167 since the project first began in 2008
2. Considering that the project has been ongoing for five years, the number of meals served in 2012 was 40% higher than the yearly average
3. In 2012 we served an average of 1,958 meals a week compared with 1,600 during the previous year. The lowest number of meals served in a week in 2012 was 1,513 (in July, during Ramadan), and the largest number was 2,257 (in June).

Apart from assisting and communicating with workers facing hardship, TWC2 also maintains a Care Fund (Compassion and Relief for Emergencies Fund), which provides financial support for workers needing urgent medical treatment, accommodation, and the means to communicate with family members overseas to travel within Singapore, or back to their home countries. In 2012 we used \$97,897 from the Fund.

In 2012 we also embarked on a number of initiatives. In April we were approached by Mr. Tan about using a property in Pulau Ubin. He offered us the use of a house for our activities and after some deliberations in EXCO, we decided to establish a small shelter for migrant workers on a trial basis. This started on November 1st and we provided accommodation to five men from Bangladesh. However, we were subsequently told by the Singapore Land Authority (SLA) that because Mr Tan did not own the property we were not allowed to operate a shelter there. There were also a number of Ubin residents who were unhappy with the presence of the men. SLA allowed us to keep running the shelter until the men were repatriated, and this took place on January 10th, 2013. The shelter was closed immediately. Although this was a short-lived project it provided us with invaluable experience in running a shelter, and this would be extremely helpful if we decide to do something similar in the future. Another activity was the Geyland Outreach Programme. Since much of our activities have focused on the Little India precinct, a large number of the workers we are in contact with come from South Asia. TWC2 felt that it was necessary to reach out to another demographic, and so we embarked on a Geylang as a locality to extend our assistance to workers from China. Led by our social worker, Kenneth Soh, the programme conducted eight

sessions, reaching a total of 2,400 China workers. The first outreach was held near Lorong 22 and Lorong 24 in Geylang, while the subsequent ones outside Kallang and Aljunied MRT stations.

Issues faced	Male workers	Female workers
Injury	1727	-
Salary problems	569	36
Transfer matters	7	19
Day off	-	10
Repatriation matters	15	8
Dispute with employer	76	31
Dispute with agent	18	7
Termination	21	9
Illegal deployment	2	-
Access to documents/money	-	1
Overstayers	297	-
Poor accommodation	3	-
Miscellaneous	158	22

Advocacy and Research

In 2012, we continued our advocacy activities, including letters to the press, and exchanges with official bodies. In March, the Singapore government announced that there would be a mandatory weekly day off for domestic workers as of January 1st 2013. Though there are serious problems with attached provisions, this was a significant step forward. The day off campaign was TWC2's longest running initiative, launched by our forerunner group, The Working Committee Two and sustained for ten years. TWC2 conducted numerous interviews with the media as well as producing a press release on the announcement. John Gee also went to appear on a news talk show programme discussing this subject. In May, TWC2 submitted its recommendations for the amendment of the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act. We have also submitted brief comments on the National Action Plan on Trafficking in Persons and did some effective public information work and offered proposals on tackling the issue of domestic workers falling from high buildings. Also in August, the initial version of the "Worse Off for Working" report was released. The report details the findings from Bangladeshi construction workers and highlights the fees charged and kickbacks received by employers to renew work contract with their employees

after the end of the initial one. Respondents paid their employers an average of \$1081 for this. The report was submitted to MOM. We also submitted a memorandum on training to the Building and Construction Authority, and the information contained in it came from research conducted in 2011 and 2012.

PART II: ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

Engagement with Partners and the Public

As part of the usual activities of TWC2, EXCO members, staff and volunteers interact with a wide variety of people. These include embassy officials, journalists, researchers, students. We collaborate on research projects, give interviews to the media, solicit help from donors, and speak at lectures, seminars and conferences. In 2012 we launched our Day School Programme and, together with other lectures and interactions with students from institutions at different levels of study, have worked with such schools as NUS, SMU, St Andrew's JC, Catholic JC, Victoria JC, Meridian JC, Hwa Chong Institution, Anglo-Chinese School, Republic Polytechnic, the United World College (of SEA) and the Canadian School. We also met with officials from the US Embassy, Philippine Embassy and the Canadian High Commission. John Gee also appeared twice over the year on Channel NewsAsia's programme, *Talking Point*.

Fundraising

In the months leading to 2012, TWC2 Treasurer reported to Exco that the organization's reserves were running very low. While that turned out to be a misperception, TWC2 began 2012 with an acute sense of financial apprehension. The organization also did not have a proper fund-raising programme. As no volunteer could be found to start a proper committee to drive fundraising, President Russell Heng took over the job temporarily. As a maiden project, a fundraising dinner was organized on 29 July at Zsofi Tapas Bar. The final amount of \$14,000 raised far exceeded the projected \$8,000. It was an auspicious beginning.

TWC2 has big institutional donors like Lee Foundation and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple and JC Trust. These and donations from a few very generous individuals have paid for the organization's three major funds: Cuff Road Food Programme, CARE Fund and SWAT (Social Workers Always There) Fund. A revamped TWC2 website has also attracted more readership and raised the organization's profile on social media. This may have contributed to the higher

amount of donations received in 2012 where the total amount raised crossed the half-a-million dollars mark. At the onset of 2013, TWC2 is in a healthier financial position than it was a year ago. However the Fundraising Committee remains a nascent project and needs to be strengthened.

The healthier financial situation has also allowed TWC2 to rent a second office on another floor of the same building to alleviate the tight working space of the main office. Enrichment programmes organized by Filipino Family Network (FFN) and Indonesian Family Network (IFN) and supported by TWC2 have moved into the second office space.

Human Resource

TWC2 experienced a crisis in human resource at the beginning of 2012. Admin Officer Mansura Sajahan left for another job in February and the only remaining staff was Kenneth Soh, the Social Worker. Key Exco members stepped in to help man the office until replacement staff could be recruited. By early April, three new employees joined the TWC2 staff: Raymond Ang as Assistant Social Worker, Christine Scully as Admin Officer and Christina Chng as Accounts Officer. The last two appointments work part-time. TWC2 is very happy with this new staff who have worked with each other and with Exco very well to deliver a very productive 2012 in which the organization took on several new projects, e.g., China worker outreach, fund-raising dinner, public donation drive for victims of Bugis MRT Construction accident.

As an appreciation for their hardwork and dedication, TWC2 approved a full 13th month salary for the three new staff instead of the pro-rated amount that would accrued to their nine months in service.

The number of people wanting to volunteer with TWC2 has also increased. This is evident from the larger numbers asking to attend Heartbeat, the monthly volunteers orientation programme. By the last quarter of 2012, the numbers turning up for Heartbeat can creep close to 30 which is the capacity limit of the TWC2's office. TWC2 recognizes the need to have a better-structured Volunteers Management Programme to handle the rising numbers. Till a volunteer can be found to do the job, President Russell Heng is taking charge of the programme. In this he is assisted by Treasurer Alex Au and two staff members Kenneth and Christine. As a broad estimate, around 100 volunteers have worked on TWC2 projects for 2012. Of these some 20% can be considered regular volunteers who would help out at least once a month.

Communications

TWC2's communication effort is part of our advocacy function. We seek to inform the public about the realities and problems faced by migrant workers and to modify social attitudes in a progressive direction.

The primary mode of communication with the public is our website, but we also engage the mainstream media from time to time when we have material that interests them. Supplementary modes of communication include social media, day schools and seminars.

Our website has been running relatively smoothly, with the occasional technical problem. It is mainly focused on workers' human interest stories, in order to give migrant workers a voice and to share their perspectives. The majority of the articles are written by volunteer writers trained by us in the art of interviewing and crafting stories. Other articles on the website include news items, research papers and analyses of data we have collected.

A typical story on the website does not get a high readership – often no more than 500 hits within a few days of upload -- but it is important not to see websites as analogous to newspapers. Newspapers are a transient "push" medium. They push stories to their readership, but that push is ephemeral and stories become largely irretrievable after a few days; in any case, most readers are not really interested in the story. Material on a website is a more permanent, and the internet is more a "pull" medium. The unique value of internet material is their searchability and retrievability. More importantly, those who take the trouble to pull and read are people genuinely interested in the topic.

The top five 2012 stories on our website, with total hits as at March 2013 are:

1. 'How low can a salary go?', uploaded Jan 2012, about 35,000 hits;
2. 'SMU students create video sensation from Little India interviews', uploaded April 2012, about 15,000 hits;
3. 'NUS students witness cleansing operation against foreign workers', uploaded, Nov 2012, about 14,000 hits;
4. 'Foreign worker told: "If we kill you, there won't be any witness"', uploaded July 2012, about 7,200 hits;
5. 'Welcome to our private hell: 30 men, 4 beds', uploaded April 2012, about 5,700 hits.

While our website does not allow comments, our Facebook fan page does, and it is our way of interacting with interested members of the public. "Likes" on our

Facebook page reached over 2,300 by March 2013. We realise that we need some kind of campaign to increase this number further, but it's a matter of having a volunteer with the right skills come to us. We do not yet have a Twitter interface with the public but it is not pressing and in any case will be extremely attention-intensive.

In 2012, we conducted eight Day Schools:

- April 2012: St Andrew's Junior College, and Catholic Junior College;
- May 2012: Victoria Junior College;
- July 2012: SMU, and NUS Scholars Programme;
- Sept 2012: Meridian Junior College;
- Oct 2012: NUS Geography Department (2 sessions).

Exco members involved in the Day Schools generally feel that this is worthwhile continuing through 2013 and beyond.

In June 2012, John Gee conducted a seminar on trafficking for media practitioners, attended by 32 people.

In August 2012, the Straits Times ran a full-page feature story on our research report "Worse off for working?". Chinese-language newspapers Zaobao, Wanbao and Shinmin, and English-language The New Paper also carried several stories about specific workers we brought to their attention. On several other occasions, Exco members of TWC2 were quoted in connection with various worker-related stories.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion 2012 was an eventful year for TWC2. The organization is now financially stronger, with a more stable staffing situation. We saw a number of successes, such as the announcement of the mandatory day off for domestic workers. Our modes of communicating with the public have also drawn both attention to the various issues faced by migrant workers and also to the work of TWC2. But more needs to be done. As seen in the direct services statistics, requests by workers for help remain high, so we will need to continue render whatever assistance we can provide immediately and increase advocacy efforts to help reduce these problems in the longer run.