



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

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DAY OFF
FOR ALL

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TWC2 Celebrates International Domestic Workers Day

Stellar performances, informative talks and a reflection on the road ahead

TWC2's inaugural International Domestic Workers Day celebration was held on the 15th June* at the YWCA Fort Canning Lodge's Sophia Cooke Ballroom.

International Domestic Workers Day marks the anniversary of the adoption of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (also known as Convention 189 or C189 for short *(See box on page four)*).

TWC2 worked with the Indonesian Family Network (IFN) and the Filipino Family Network (FFN) to put together a day of entertainment and education befitting of the anniversary of such an important milestone.

The mood on the day of the celebration was absolutely electric. A collection of brilliantly curated booths was set up just outside the ballroom. The booths ranged from informative booths on first aid, breast cancer awareness and insurance to recreational activities like Ukulele playing and the ever-popular photo booth.

The day's official programme commenced with a speech made by TWC2 President Dr Russell Heng.

Apart from running through the brief history of C189 and the significance of International Domestic Workers Day, Dr Heng also took the chance to highlight where Singapore stood in terms of the treatment of domestic workers.

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TWC2's Website

New articles go up on our website every few days. It is a useful source of information for both those new to migrant worker issues and to those conducting ongoing research.

We post our own research on the website as it becomes available. The latest papers are a memorandum on the training of Bangladeshi workers for jobs in the construction sector in Singapore, and our proposals for the national budget.

Our website is at:
<http://twc2.org.sg>

Next "Heartbeat"

The next session of 'Heartbeat', our monthly gathering for those interested in volunteering with TWC2, will be at the TWC2 office on Wednesday, 9th July, at 7.30pm.

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Events

April 1st-11th: Parallel Paths, a photo exhibition, was shown at ArtSpace222, in Queen Street. Devised by two sisters, Aishah and Wajihah Hamid, and The Ordinary Man project, the exhibition featured photographs taken by 18 South Asian migrant workers and 13 locals who went on a photography trail together. They saw some things differently, but found out that there was also a lot that they shared in their outlooks and interests. The exhibition was well received. During the eleven days it was on, there was a steady flow of visitors and some bought postcards that were put on sale. The proceeds of the sale were donated towards The Cuff Road Project's half a millionth meal celebration.

April 28th: The Cuff Road Project holds a celebration to mark the serving of its half a millionth meal: See report opposite.

May 4th: Over 60 domestic workers came to a picnic arranged by the Indonesian Family Network to mark Labour Day. Three staff from the Indonesian embassy also came and responded to questions from the workers about their employment rights.

May 16th: A day school was held for 20 or so architecture students and lecturers from Ngee Ann Polytechnic. The three-hour programme, known as Up Close with Migrant Workers, provided a chance for participants to find out as far as reasonably possible how migrant workers in Little India live from day to day. It helped them to gain a deeper understanding of the problems the workers face and how TWC2 assists them. Rob Teo, head of TWC2's Public Education Committee, headed the session, with assistance from TWC2 president, Russell Heng. The previous Friday, the Up Close with Migrant Workers programme was presented to a group of around 30 civil servants.

The programme can be provided to other groups, for a modest fee. Anyone interested in arranging a presentation is invited to contact TWC2 Administrative Officer, Christine Scully, for details at info@twc2.org.sg or to call 62477001 during working hours on weekdays.

May 17th: A case management training session was organized for volunteers who wish to work with domestic workers. It was conducted by Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman and Shelley Thio, both members of TWC2's committee and also with considerable experience in working on the whole range of problems that domestic workers can face.

June 6th: A new guide for expat employers of domestic workers was launched on the website of the British Chamber of Commerce in Singapore. It was written by Gerard Wong, who began work on it a year ago while still a student at Singapore Management University; he is now at the Institute of South East Asian Studies. He spoke at the launch; so did Anthony Chen, who directed the award-winning film, Ilo-Ilo, Neil Humphreys, who writes for 'Today' and John Gee, of TWC2, who assisted with advice in the writing of the guide. The guide, titled *An Expat's Guide to Employing a Domestic Worker in Singapore*, can be found online at: <http://britcham.org.sg/knowledge-bank/features--article>

Discover Singapore Marks First Anniversary

Discover Singapore celebrated its one-year anniversary at Changi Beach Park on 24th May 2014. The location chosen was at the far end of Changi Coast Road, which is only accessible by private transport; this had been DS' motto - we wanted to bring the men to places that they normally would not go to in Singapore.

Around 35 Bangladeshi and Indian migrant workers and 10 volunteers participated in this outing. It was a beautiful Saturday, blessed with clear blue skies (the past week had been pouring cats & dogs). The afternoon was well spent with games and food. After a round of charades, some chose to relax by the beach, some went for a leisure dip in the sea, while another group formed an impromptu band and entertained all with songs and music!

Some of the men also prepared a delicious biryani and salad dinner for everyone.

The celebration climaxed with songs & dance performances from the men and even a magic show by one of the volunteers.

*"I think it (the interaction with the workers) reinforced how I viewed them as **friendly and nice individuals**, some of whom really like to take photos - Haha": a new volunteer, Sean, shared his thoughts about his impression of the migrants workers.*

*Another new volunteer, Liz, commented "Well I expected it to be fun but not so organized, but it turned out to be very well planned and **even more fun than I expected!**"*

*"Thanks to Discover Singapore TWC2 for bring us to Changi Beach Park . We enjoyed play, swimming, dinner with TWC2 volunteers . **It's our memory of Singapore.** Thanks again TWC2 and volunteers" Amir Khan, a worker who shared his feelings on our facebook page.*



Lucky draw: Russell draws tickets, while Ummairoh, of IFN, and Davey, of FFN, handle announcements.

Dr Heng pointed out that a survey done by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) had shown that only one third of newly arrived domestic workers received the mandatory day off. He also pointed out other lapses in Singapore's treatment of domestic workers such as (but not limited to) the extremely long working hours, lack of medical leave, restriction of movement and above all, in some cases, verbal, psychological and physical abuse and even sexual harassment. Dr Heng also highlighted TWC2's commitment to continuously provide support to foreign domestic workers in Singapore.

The programme for the day was equal parts enlightening and entertaining.

As part of the programme, the Breast Cancer Foundation (BCF) conducted an information session for the ladies.

BCF volunteer and breast cancer survivor Mrs Esther Da Silva shared her story of her courageous battle with breast cancer. Her personal account showcased to attendees the importance of regular breast examinations and reinforced how early detection can make a big difference in mitigating more severe repercussions. A comprehensive presentation about breast cancer followed by a question and answer session was also conducted by Dr Y Y Tan, a medical practitioner who volunteers with the BCF.

Considering that breast cancer is one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers in females and that most (if not all) domestic workers in Singapore are female, the session was very useful in helping the ladies understand a little more about the issue and helped to address any misconceptions they may have had about it.

Using the universal language of humour, TWC2, IFN and FFN put on skits showcasing the solutions to two problems commonly faced by foreign domestic workers - the non-payment of salary and unplanned pregnancy. While the humorous depiction of these situations had the audience in stitches, I also heard muted whispers of agreement from some of the participants about just how realistic and prevalent these scenarios are.

The afternoon was also interlaced with amazing performances that showcased Balinese and contemporary dance numbers, a Taekwondo demonstration and a poetry recitation.

While I wish this following prejudice didn't exist, if anyone needed proof (*or a gentle reminder*) that foreign domestic workers are **not** only defined by their occupation, this was it. In that one ballroom, there were dancers, actors, comedians, athletes and even poets. The women shone as they shared their interests and hobbies with the crowd and also showcased their keen interest in learning and personal development.

International Domestic Workers Day is a definitely day worth commemorating. Not only does it celebrate the step forward taken by ILO in the adoption of C189, it also celebrates the hardworking domestic workers around the world.

However, as we celebrate this day, let us remember that this convention is so far only in force in eight countries,² (*with another six countries to follow suit in the latter half of 2014 and early 2015*). Even then, once a country has ratified and brought into force the convention, there is still work to be done to ensure that all the correct procedures are in place to ensure that rules are not flouted.



Information stands at the IDWD event attract a lot of interest

Singapore herself has not endorsed the convention. When it comes to securing the rights and ensuring the proper treatment of foreign domestic workers, there is still a long way to go. However, as long as TWC2 has the support of members of the public, volunteers and its own members, this is a battle that will keep being fought.

Nicolette Stewart

What is the Domestic Workers Convention (C189)?

C189 was adopted in 2011, during the 100th session of the annual International Labour Conference, which sets policy for the International Labour Organisation.

The articles in C189 define international standards for the treatment of domestic workers. These articles not only serve to help to ensure the fair treatment of domestic workers but also strive to bridge the longstanding gap of unequal treatment between domestic workers and workers employed in other fields.

Rights set down in C189 include¹:

- At least 24 consecutive hours of rest a week
- Decent living conditions that respect the privacy of live-in domestic workers
- The freedom to choose not to remain in the household or with household members during periods of daily or weekly rest and annual leave
- The entitlement to keep possession of their travel and identity documents

Once a country chooses to ratify C189, it makes the commitment to ensure it abides by the articles of the convention.

**International Domestic Workers Day (IDWD) is celebrated internationally on the 16th of June. TWC2 chose to celebrate IDWD on the Sunday before the earmarked day (15th June) as it would be more convenient for participants to attend.*

1: International Labour Conference Provisional Record, 2011: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_157836.pdf

2: Ratifications of C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189):

http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460

Talking Migrants

We're often called upon to talk to student groups about migrant worker issues. I feel that this is a valuable experience for both the speaker and the audience. Obviously we hope that the students learn something about TWC2, come to an appreciation of the contributions of migrant workers, an understanding of the sacrifices they make and the price they pay, and an awareness of how the system in Singapore disadvantages places migrant workers in an easily exploitable position. But is this always the case?

Some of the earliest talks I gave about workers were to primary school students at an international school. These children, 10 and 11 years old, were surprisingly receptive and interested. They posed questions directly to the injured men who accompanied me in direct and unembarrassed way, asking such questions as: Who are your friends? How do you eat without your fingers? What do you do every day? How often do you talk to your family? After the talk and after showing off the school and their classrooms to the men, the children all wrote charmingly sweet letters to the men.



Debbie and two workers assisted by TWC2 with primary school students at the Canadian International School

The men were delighted to have this interaction with children and answered their questions without going into complicated regulations and shady payments. Both sides were interested in the relative cost of education. The teacher shared information about the cost of a year of schooling for these children, and the men informed the class what they paid for their children's school. This stark contrast in wealth didn't stand in the way of an open and friendly exchange between the men, the students and the teachers.

The success of talks to older students depends to a large degree on how much preparation the students have received from the teachers and experience with migrant workers. At one Junior College I met a group of students bored almost to the point of rudeness. I spoke about male workers following a talk by a representative from HOME about female domestic workers. The students were disruptive throughout the presentation and asked no questions at the end. I think the teachers should have briefed this group better or alerted me to start with more basic information to grab their attention.

I would have begun my talk by engaging the students to respond or to think about the humanity of the individuals who come from abroad to work in Singapore. Having students to reflect on the ill-treatment often meted out to domestic workers and male workers might also have led the students to review their own attitudes and assumptions. Few of these students admitted to knowing any domestic workers and none claimed to have had conversations with foreign workers in service industry or construction. Some required reading or class discussions might have been helpful in preparing the students to consider these issues.

At a well-known girls secondary school, the students seemed genuinely astonished and moved by the information in my talk. My objective was to make them realize that their background and wealth might lead them to assume that the unfortunate circumstances of some migrant workers are due to bad choices and financial illiteracy rather than agents and recruiters with deceptive promises and decisions made out of desperation. While these young ladies may not offer themselves as volunteers, I believe they were nudged into a new understanding of migration causes and consequences.

At another independent secondary school I met students who were very well informed and had much to say. They had arranged a three-day conference about leadership and had invited several speakers for this event. The event included a large group of students from 'neighbourhood schools', which allowed for more mixing of ideas and discussion. This group asked probing questions, showing a strong interest. I feel certain that this group had an emotional reaction to the information that is likely to affect their understanding of migration and globalization.

While it's easy to preach to the converted, I feel that we often need to grapple with the unwillingness of people to accept that systems much change for migrants to prosper. A large number of people accept without question the notion that migration is beneficial to the migrant, the host country and the sending country. This may be based on the experience of the educated cohort of foreign professionals who come to work at well-paid jobs. Those people who blame low-wage migrant workers for paying huge amounts for recruitment and fail to lift themselves from debt for their situation don't usually request a workshop from TWC2, but their views shouldn't be ignored in our presentations.

Debbie Fordyce



Christine Pelly Speaks to students at United World College, 13th January 2014. Several other volunteers, as well as men from The Cuff Road Project, also spoke with students. An essay by a student based on this experience was published in India Se, a local magazine.

There Should Be a Better Way...

(This article describes the experience of a worker TWC2 recently encountered: his name has been changed. Unfortunately, his is not an isolated case.)

Mushir, a young Bangladeshi worker, called TWC2 for help. He had been with the company that hired him for four months, and now the company was sending him home. They said that they didn't have any work for him.

We asked him whether the company had paid him for his work. He told us that it had. We asked whether they had mistreated him in any way. No, he told us; they'd treated him well.

He wanted to stay on in Singapore and look for another job, but his company wanted to send him home and was not prepared to release him to look for another employer, and so, much to our regret, we had to tell Mushir that we could not help him: the

company he had worked for had acted within the law on all matters, and so it was within its legal rights to send him home.

Like the vast majority of his fellow countrymen who come to work in Singapore, Mushir paid for his job. He paid in cash for his recruitment and training, for transport, for accommodation while training and probably for the processing of his passport application too. His employer may have had a cut of the money he paid out: that is what many Bangladeshi workers suspect happens. At any rate, he would have paid nearly the equivalent of one year's salary while working in Singapore, so there was no way that a mere four months of employment could have covered his costs in coming to work here. He would have been better off staying at home and earning nothing: in his case and those of many workers like him, the claim that 'They are better paid here than in their own country' seems particularly hollow.

Mushir and his family are the big losers from his early return home, but they are not the only ones. He trained in order to work here and for four months, he gained on the job experience, while apparently not receiving any complaints about the quality of his work. This might have been put to good use in a country that says it wants to increase productivity, but instead, he had to go home, and might not be able to afford to return with another company, even if he wants to: other men will be trained up, placed and charged for the privilege, in place of him and others like him.

There ought to be better ways of dealing with men in Mushir's position, and TWC2 has pointed out what they could be, most recently in our recommendations on Singapore's national budget. There we argued for minimum contracts of two years for migrant workers, and for workers who were not employed for this minimum period to be able to seek alternative employment for the outstanding period of their contract, with the presumption that they would be able to renew their contract with their new employer.

John Gee

"Big Bad NGOs"

All human beings should have the unrestricted right to seek advice and help from whoever and wherever they wish. Yet many migrant workers are afraid to contact non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to ask for assistance, or for it to be known that they have been in contact with them.

Some are simply wary of saying or doing anything that they imagine might get them into trouble with the authorities or their employers. They may be dissatisfied with their pay or conditions, but while they are being paid, they soldier on and make no complaint to those they do not know personally.

In some cases, however, workers have been warned off having contact with NGOs. From time to time, workers tell us that they have been told that if they have complaints, they must not pursue them with people outside their companies, whether NGOs or the Ministry of Manpower: in some contracts that Chinese workers were obliged to sign, in particular, we have seen clauses that threaten to penalize a worker financially if he makes any complaint to an outside body. We have also encountered domestic workers who have been threatened with repatriation if they see NGO help. We recently heard from some South Asian workers with cases to resolve that a "lawyer" had told them that MOM would not assist them if they asked TWC2's help – in fact, MOM has assisted many workers who have turned to us.

All such threats are wrong and entirely without justification. Employers who are law-abiding, treat their workers decently and pay them their due salary on time have no reason for concern about their employees seeking advice and help; invariably when we encounter workers who tell us of these threats, their employers have used them to try to cover up their own wrongdoing.

In our view, the right to communicate freely with MOM and with NGOs must be upheld and protected; all workers should be assured that their right to be employed and to remain in Singapore will be protected if they seek advice or assistance

In Brief

Domestic Workers Convention, Three Years On

The International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention was three years old on 16th June. It has so far been ratified by 14 countries. This year so far, three countries have ratified it: Costa Rica, Colombia and Argentina.

Latin America has the best record of all the continents on ratification of the convention by far. Besides the above countries, Ecuador, Guyana, Nicaragua, Paraguay and Uruguay have ratified it. The other ratifiers are Germany, Italy, Mauritius, Philippines and South Africa.

ILO Adopts New Protocol to Tackle Modern Forms of Forced Labour

A new legally binding ILO Protocol on Forced Labour aims to advance prevention, protection and compensation measures, as well as to intensify efforts to eliminate contemporary forms of slavery.

ILO press release, 11th June 2014

GENEVA – The International Labour Organization (ILO) has adopted a new legally binding Protocol designed to strengthen global efforts to eliminate forced labour.

The Protocol, supported by a Recommendation, was adopted by government, employer and worker delegates to the **International Labour Conference (ILC)** with 437 votes for 27 abstentions and 8 against.

The new Protocol brings the existing **ILO Convention 29 on Forced Labour**, adopted in 1930, into the modern era to address practices such as human trafficking. The accompanying Recommendation provides technical guidance on its implementation.

“The Protocol and Recommendation mark a major step forward in the fight against forced labour and represent a firm commitment among governments, employer and worker organizations to eliminate contemporary forms of slavery,” Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General said.

“Forced labour violates the human rights and dignity of millions of women and men, girls and boys. It contributes to the perpetuation of poverty and stands in the way of the achievement of decent work for all,” he added.

There are currently an estimated 21 million forced labour victims worldwide. A **recent ILO report** estimates that US\$ 150 billion in illegal profits are made in the private economy each year through modern forms of slavery.

New obligations to prevent forced labour

The Protocol strengthens the international legal framework by creating new obligations to prevent forced labour, to protect victims and to provide access to remedy, such as compensation for material and physical harm.

It requires governments to take measures to better protect workers, in particular migrant labourers, from fraudulent and abusive recruitment practices and emphasizes the role of employers and workers in the fight against forced labour.

“The new instruments will complement and strengthen existing international law, in particular the UN Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children,” said David Garner, President of the ILC Committee on Forced Labour and Australian Government representative.

The ILC Committee had to decide whether to push for a legally binding Protocol supported by a Recommendation or a Recommendation on its own.

The need for a legally binding instrument

Government, employer and worker Committee members emphasized the vital role played by the **Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)**, and the **Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105)** but concluded that gaps in their implementation called for additional measures.

The Committee agreed on the need for a legally binding instrument that establishes a common framework for the 177 ILO member states that have ratified Convention 29 – as well as the 8 countries that have not – to move towards the elimination of forced labour.

“The Protocol and Recommendation represent a call to action. They go beyond pious words; they are more than text on a piece of paper,” Ed Potter, Committee Employer Vice Chair said.

“This is a humanitarian moment, a human rights moment, and represents what the international business community stands for – respect for human rights,” he added.

More than half of the victims of forced labour are women and girls, primarily in domestic work and commercial sexual exploitation, while men and boys were primarily in forced economic exploitation in agriculture, construction, and mining.

“By adopting this Protocol, we have sent a clear signal of our commitment to the 21 million victims of forced labour around the world. We have also shown the capacity of the ILO to modernize, and adapt one of its most symbolic conventions to the realities of today,” said Committee Worker Vice Chair, Yves Veyrier.

TWC2 adds: Singapore’s representatives – government, employers’ and workers’ representatives - voted in favour of the protocol. Of neighbouring countries, all the Indonesian and Filipino representatives voted in favour; Malaysia’s government representatives voted in favour and its employers’ representative voted against, with no worker vote recorded; all Thailand’s four representatives were among the eight who voted against the protocol. Three days later, Thailand announced that it was reversing its stand and now supported the protocol.

Singapore generally maintains that it will not support international legal instruments unless it is ready to comply with them.