



Transient Workers Count Too
DIGNITY OVERDUE

NEWSLETTER

WEEKLY
DAY OFF
FOR ALL

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International Migrants Day/10 Years of TWC2 Celebrated



TWC2 president, Russell Heng, cuts TWC2's 10th birthday cake.

Every seat was taken at "Lunch with Heart", held on December 7th as a combined International Migrants Day and TWC2 10th anniversary celebration. But not for long: what with a lucky draw, a game and entertainment, many of those attending spent much of their time up on their feet.

The great majority of those who came along were migrant workers: Indonesian and Filipina domestic workers who came through the Indonesian and Filipino Family Networks, and Bangladeshi and Indian male workers, mostly from our food programme, The Cuff Road Project. There was also a sprinkling of early members and workers of TWC2, as befitted an anniversary event.

The lunch was provided at Kebabs and Curries, under a big glass dome atop the Mustafa Centre in Little India. The food was delicious and plentiful. Slices of TWC2's 10th anniversary cake and specially prepared TWC2 cupcakes were also distributed to all those present. Before the cake was cut, "Happy Birthday" was sung in English, Tagalog, Bahasa Indonesia and Bengali.

Entertainment was provided by Bollywood-style dancers, Funsteppers, whose synchronized moves and energy drew loud applause. Their appearance was followed by games. The results of a lucky draw were announced in two stages, early in the afternoon and then towards the end, with the top prize announced last.

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TWC2 AGM 2015

TWC2's 2015 Annual General Meeting will take place in March. Full details will be provided in the next newsletter.

Besides reviewing the society's work in the past year, this AGM will be one at which elections will be held for all Executive Committee posts, including the presidency, since current president, Russell Heng, will have completed two terms and may not stand again under TWC2's constitution.

All members are welcome to attend.

If your membership needs renewing or you are not a member, you can renew/join by filling in the form at the back of this newsletter and sending it to the TWC2 office, with your subscription payment.

Next Heartbeat

The next Heartbeat, our get-together for people interested in volunteering with TWC2, is at the TWC2 office on Wednesday, 14th January, at 7.30pm.

If you're interested in coming along, please register with TWC2's Administration Officer at info@twc2.org.sg

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Events

November 1st: TWC2 hosted a group of 17 participants from the MENDAKI Club, a community of Malay/Muslim young professionals and students who are engaged in affairs concerning the community, Singapore and the world.

The day school session was held in Little India and involved the participants taking part in our Cuff Road Project meal programme, followed by a 90-minute presentation and an hour-long walking tour where they learnt about the social and cultural significance of key spaces within Little India. This activity was the first trail organised by MENDAKI Club for its Conversations series.

November 3rd: The Prevention of Human Trafficking Act was passed by Parliament. TWC2 has called for Singapore to adopt a dedicated anti-trafficking law, rather than amend parts of existing laws, since 2008. We called for the law to include the definition of trafficking contained in the Palermo Protocol, which is the main international anti-trafficking instrument. We also called for the law to be victim-centred: to be supportive of those who have been, or may have been, trafficked.

What has been passed is a major step forward, but has serious weaknesses, most notably in the area of victim support. An article published on the website of anti-trafficking coalition, StopTraffickingSG!, sets out some of the reservations many anti-trafficking activists have about the new law:

<http://stoptraffickingsg.wordpress.com/2014/11/04/singapores-new-anti-trafficking-act-does-not-go-far-enough/>

Subsequently, John Gee, chair of TWC2's Research Sub-Committee, wrote an article for the site that discusses directions that might be taken constructively and realistically by those NGOs and individuals working against trafficking who are critical of the new act. It can be read at:

<http://stoptraffickingsg.wordpress.com/2014/11/17/the-anti-trafficking-act-looking-ahead/>

November 4th: The Stamford American International School invited Debbie Fordyce to talk to the primary 5 students about migrant issues. About 125 of the 10 and 11-year old students had been introduced to the subject of migration, from refugees fleeing war, famine, environmental and economic disaster to specialists who move with their families to take up well-paying professional jobs. The students heard from Debbie about the restrictions on low-wage workers in Singapore and the lack of job opportunities in their home countries which cases them to pay huge amounts for the job.

After the talk, almost everyone raised their hand with questions, some prepared beforehand and some inspired by the talk. Why don't the employers pay them what they're supposed to? How does the quota system affect the foreign workers? Why don't they go on strike? Do they have trouble getting used to the heat? What's it like inside their dorms? What else do you do for them besides the food? What can we do to help? They were a delightful and uninhibited audience. The school plans to raise money from their 'free dress day' to support the meal project, and several teachers are talking about more ways that they can get involved with the migrant workers.

November 28th: About 120 people came to a public symposium on "Migration and Construction Work" held at Scape, a popular youth venue close to Orchard Road. The symposium was organized by the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore (ARI) as part of the Migrating Out of Poverty programme. After welcoming remarks from Professor Brenda Yeoh, the symposium was began with two short films made by "Beyond the Border, Behind the Men".

Doctor C.R. Abrar from the University of Dhaka then spoke about workers in the construction industry in South Asia, based on studies conducted in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. They are generally employed on a seasonal basis and, surprisingly, although they work within the subcontinent, mostly in their own countries, they are nearly all employed through middlemen, who handle their recruitment, salary payment and settlement of claims. The rate of unionization is very low and little attention is given to health and safety of workers.

Grace Baey, from ARI, then introduced the findings of a project, just completed, on Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore. One problem that leapt out from it was the high cost of placement. Workers take sixteen months to pay off their debts, the ARI survey found (a TWC2 survey three years ago made a similar finding, of over 17 months). This makes them very vulnerable to coercion to accept poor conditions of employment when they arrive, since they are afraid to complain and risk being sent home.

John Gee, chair of TWC2's research sub-committee, spoke as a commentator on the previous speakers' presentations, pointing to similarities and differences between the workers' experiences and concluding that the empowerment of the workers was vital to securing better conditions for them.

The interesting question and answer session that followed had to be cut short because the symposium ran out of time.

IMD/10 Years of TWC2 Celebrated *(Continued from Page One)*

Five- and ten-year long service certificates issued by the National Council of Social Service were presented to veteran volunteers.

“Lunch with Heart” was, in part, a fundraising event. TWC2 invited supporters to attend and/or buy tickets to donate for the use of migrant workers, and many people did so: 260 tickets were sold in total, and some people were generous enough to add on donations, so that, after deducting costs, we raised almost \$24,000, making this the most successful fund-raising event TWC2 has held so far. We are grateful to all who supported Lunch With Heart with donations in money, in kind or by their work.

TWC2 recognizes that there is still a great deal to do, but we think that our tenth anniversary was something to celebrate. It was touch and go at times whether we'd be able to sustain our activities, but we came through. In the ten years of TWC2's existence so far, we have directly assisted over 16,000 migrant workers – over 6,000 in the last two years alone; our food programme, started in 2008, has served well over half a million meals and our research and advocacy has nudged along a gradual process of reform in Singapore aimed at improving the conditions of employment and life for close on a million work permit holders.



A prize for game participants

“Discover Singapore”- Still Busy

Discover Singapore (DS) has continued with its outing programme over the past five months, as the following list shows:

2 Aug: BHP Billiton sponsored a trip to SEA Aquarium on Sentosa and during the same outing Ben & Jerry's sponsored ice-cream for all. Please refer to write up: <http://twc2.org.sg/2014/09/11/from-sharks-to-ice-cream-via-peace-love-and-sponsorship/>

16 Aug: A group of Raffles Institution students arranged a Hari Raya dinner treat. The boys are doing a Research Education Service Learning Project, entitled “Project Accept”, to reach out to migrant workers. We had the highest turnout for an outing, with 67 men participating.

14 Sep: DS brought the men to Singapore Sports Hub, the newest attraction in town. They swam in the aquatic pool and played volleyball there.

27 Sep: Gitanjali - a production by Necessary Stage (Triangle project) - tickets sponsored.

5 Oct: A group of Indian families (Sewa Day and BridgeAble) sponsored an outing to Changi Beach Park to celebrate SEWA day and Hari Raya for the men.

22 Nov: Esplanade Bollywood night - Esplanade invited us to Indian Festival of Arts (The third time they have done so).

Besides the main outings listed above, DS also brought the men to a book launch on migrant worker experiences and also worked with the Esplanade to have the men pen down their wishes on the giant red spheres that are now placed in Marina Bay.

Check out the photos on our Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TWC2DiscoverSingapore>

Last but not least, DS was recently featured in mothership, <http://mothership.sg/2014/11/sporeans-help-migrant-workers-discover-spore-one-outing-at-a-time/>

New Migrant Worker Dormitories

Far-Flung Dormitories: May Be Cleaner, But Not Always Better

The old aphorism about the three most important things to consider when buying property –location, location, and location- is true of worker dormitories as well, but with different meanings for different people. The government plans for foreign workers to be housed in purpose-built dormitories to better ensure proper standards are met, but the space required for large dormitories require that they're located in outlying areas; migrant workers would prefer dorms close to the worksite to cut down travel time and cost; and Singapore residents, concerned about strain on existing infrastructure, perceived inconvenience and stranger-danger, would rather low wage workers be housed anywhere else, not seen or heard.

Cost is a key consideration for employers. Most purpose-built dormitories are indeed clean and well maintained, but the additional cost for employers are likely to mean lower salaries for the workers, a major hardship for the worker. Transportation by company bus or lorry from the dormitory to the worksite, is another additional cost likely to reduce worker salaries.

When moving a large number of workers, rather than hire a team of drivers and provide a fleet of vehicles, the employer has fewer drivers make numerous trips. This results in workers having to wake early to be ready for the lorry that delivers them to the worksite hours before the start of work, or wait several hours at the end of the working day before the transport takes them home. A 15-hour working day is not uncommon among small sub-contractors, which makes waiting time at the start or end of the working day a great inconvenience as it takes a bite out of workers' limited time to relax and sleep. Men staying in crowded shophouses of Geylang and Little India are closer to buses and MRT lines and more likely to be responsible for their own transportation. Most would happily trade the orderliness of the huge dorm in distant corners for a cluttered room nearer public transport or shabby on-site housing.

A recent article in the Straits Times (18 Nov 2014) says about 200,000 foreign workers live in purpose-built dormitories and the rest, about 185,000 live in other places such as shophouses and temporary quarters at construction sites. The plan over the next two years includes beds for 100,000 workers in nine new purpose-built dorms, with amenities like foodcourts and recreation areas. As much as TWC2 speaks out about substandard housing for workers, that's not to say that all shophouse and construction site housing is substandard, or that workers themselves would select a clean and tidy place over one that allows faster access to the worksite and more control over his time and movements.

Far from home and family, the importance of interaction with relatives and friends cannot be overstated. Men strive to maintain the connections and obligations towards family and others from the same town or village. Cooking together, sharing news from home, borrowing and lending money, looking after one another are crucial for foreign workers accustomed to close familial ties and community involvement. Choosing one's own housing and sharing living space with friends reduces the isolation by preserving contacts and personal ties.

It may be of little consequence to the Singapore public to have transient workers shunted to the far reaches of Singapore, but it recalls the former apartheid system of South Africa. Even if transient workers are housed in far-flung areas for practical reasons rather than for the purpose of segregating them from the resident population, the result is the same. The physical distance marginalizes workers and reinforces the public's negative views, further reducing the possibility of casual and meaningful encounters between the two groups.

TWC2 volunteers have regular interaction with a large number of male migrant workers, mostly the South Asian men who are not permitted to work while awaiting work injury compensation or the resolution to a salary dispute who attend the food program, The Cuff Road Project. Most of these men live in shophouses in Little India and Geylang, and appear regularly for the meals. Given the length of time needed to conclude these issues –more than one year for many and a more than two years for a few- living in a place that provides suitable social, spiritual, and medical needs is crucial. It should also be noted that most of these men are physically able to work, in spite of the prohibition against working while on special pass. Life in Little India and Geylang offers more opportunity to make money. It's a risk many men are prepared to take in order to support themselves and their families during this long and uncertain period of waiting.

As little contact as male transient workers have with Singaporeans and cultural or recreational activities in Singapore, they still appreciate being considered a part of the local community. Recently several Indian and Bangladeshi migrant workers were invited to the wedding of one of our TWC2 volunteers. The men loved the music, the garlands of flowers, and the brilliantly coloured saris at the Hindu ceremony. This was the first time in all their years of working in Singapore that they were treated as welcomed guests amid the hundreds of friends and family of the newlyweds. A few days later a group of fifty men were escorted by TWC2's 'Discover Singapore' volunteers to the Esplanade for a performance of Indian dance and puppetry. TWC2 encourages interactions like this, and the inclusion of transient workers in such enjoyable activities in Singapore. The chances of any meaningful contact between migrant workers and Singapore residents is less likely if migrants are confined to purpose-build dorms in distant areas, without opportunities to attend special events and share public spaces.

Beyond Mere Sustenance

Celebrating Food and the Employers Who Know its Importance

Let's talk about food.

For many of us, food is no longer just something that we use to fill out stomachs with. Food is something we look forward to. It is something that brings happiness into our lives. Having a good meal can often help to alleviate the stress of a bad day or take us back to a fond memory of a comforting place or time.

When one starts to think about Singapore and its relationship with food, the image of a food paradise formed by the melting pot of diverse cultures and heritages comes to mind. Food plays a major part in the country's social fabric. People abroad have come to know Singapore as a country that takes its food very seriously and whose inhabitants eat round the clock. If anyone should be able to understand the significance of food beyond sustenance, it should be someone living in Singapore.

In October, the Straits Times published an article about domestic workers not getting enough food. It was substantiated by HOME's findings that within a year, they had received a 20% increase in complaints about poor or insufficient food.¹

In November 2014, MOM responded to the article and a follow-up forum letter by saying that their own survey had found that 99% of foreign domestic workers reported having sufficient food to eat daily, with only 0.1% of complaints being about inadequate food. MOM also mentioned that the number of complaints was falling.²

While we could go back and forth about these findings, this is not what we'll explore here. While the quantity of food is **definitely** important to address, we started to wonder about the quality and the variety.

It would be hard to dispute the fact that having access to food of your liking and tastes definitely helps to increase a person's level of happiness.

Coming from a nation of food lovers who have no qualms queuing for long periods of time or scouring the island for the best chicken rice or tau huey (*sweet bean curd dessert*), it seems very hypocritical that when it comes to food for our domestic helpers, the nation's benchmark is simply that it 'must be adequate'.

Even if you ignore the fact that 'adequate' seems like a very subjective benchmark to be using, one should ask if we ourselves are not content with just adequate when it comes to food, why are we asking our domestic workers to be?

I wondered, in a nation of food lovers, how many employers actually realize the importance of food beyond its rudimentary purpose?

I wanted some domestic workers' perspectives on this, so on a Sunday afternoon, I strolled down to Lucky Plaza and spoke with a few. The fact that they were free to go out on the weekend suggests that they are likely to have employers who have some sort of understanding about the rights that foreign domestic workers deserve.

Of course, the problem of inadequate food or malnourished foreign domestic workers does exist, and more widespread is the provision of food that is nutritionally adequate, but has little variety. TWC2 and HOME have both had first hand experience with dealing with foreign domestic workers who have reported having too little to eat. Some of the ladies that I spoke to, who personally did not face any problems with their meals, did share that the lack of food was a problem they had heard about. This suggests that the issue is not one that is rare or obscure. But it is also important to highlight positive examples of employers treating foreign domestic workers with respect and dignity, and I heard about them from workers I met that Sunday.

Lita*, the first foreign domestic worker I spoke to has been working in Singapore for 20 years. When I asked about how meals were handled in the house she worked in, she smiled and said that she mainly cooked western food but as her employers had Spanish heritage, the food they ate was very similar to Filipino food. She also mentioned that her employers provided her with a separate food allowance and that she felt that she was being given a fair amount.

Lita's friend Imee* also echoed similar sentiments. While she did not get a food allowance, she had no complaints about the amount of food that she got or the variety as she felt that the food she prepared for her Mexican employers was similar enough to what she was used to.

Both ladies did mention that there were small differences in their employers' diets when compared to Filipino cuisine, such as the replacement of rice with bread or potatoes but both assured me that they were very happy with their meal arrangements.

I also spoke to two ladies who were employed by Singaporean families.

Marilag* has been working for a Muslim family for five years and is in charge of all the cooking. When I asked her what kind of food she regularly prepared she rattled off a list of local dishes including Nasi Lemak.

I asked if she missed not being able to prepare or eat Filipino food at the house and was gently corrected by her as she informed me that she did in fact occasionally cook Filipino dishes for her employers and that they would all enjoy the meal together.

Tala*, currently employed by a Chinese family, has been working in Singapore for 12 years. She said that while she cooks Chinese dishes for her employer's family, she is given reign of the kitchen and is allowed to cook other dishes for herself, if she pleases.

While I was speaking to Tala, she also said that it was unlikely that I would find anyone at Lucky Plaza who had complaints about the food they were given. While she did not know anyone personally, she suggested that domestic workers who faced problems with meals were more likely to have employers who would not grant them their mandatory off days.

Rhemy, a TWC2 volunteer who came along with me and acted as my translator also told me that she was in charge of all the marketing and cooking in the house. She too mentioned that she cooks a range of cuisines for her employers and that they too enjoy a good hearty Filipino meal.

Rhemy also informed me that not too long ago, she had received a call from a Filipino domestic worker looking for advice about her present employers. The Filipino domestic worker reported that she was only fed one meal a day. While Rhemy will be following up with this case on her own time, it does go to show that the problem of foreign domestic workers not being given enough food does exist.

It is great to hear that there are indeed employers who recognize that when it comes to food, it is not enough to just fill stomachs.

The provision of a food allowance or allowing the domestic worker to cook when she sees fit shows that some employers understand that food is something they do not have the right to police or limit.

What is even more heartwarming is the sharing of culture between employer and employee. After all, what better way to get to know a person than to enjoy a good meal with them?

Nicolette Stewart

1: <http://www.straitstimes.com/news/singapore/more-singapore-stories/story/more-foreign-domestic-workers-say-they-do-not-get-enough#2>

2: <http://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/Pages/PressRepliesDetail.aspx?listid=263>

* These names have been changed

Message from a Volunteer

Not long ago after I attended the heartbeat session, I have made up in my mind that construction workers in general are left in the dark and really needed help and support (which I still do). However, a couple of weeks back, I was stranded in botanic gardens one fine Saturday morning after a walk with my 2 dogs as no cab would take me. My handphone was busted and I waited for quite a while in the taxi stand in the MRT and was starting to get impatient with mixed feelings of despair. Felt stuck and helpless as I watched cab after cab give me a miss due to having dogs to transport. All the while I was feeling frustrated, I was watching trucks going in and out of a bustling construction site that was busy building in progress a fine looking condominium. Then it struck me! Maybe I can borrow the guardhouse phone on site and call a cab? So I crossed over the road and approached a southern asian man and asked if I could borrow his phone. Without even flinching, he passed me his phone and somehow understood that I needed some help. When he handed me his phone, it was the motorola phone that is a handphone as well as a 2 way radio. It looked brand new, rugged heavy duty and professional looking. After I made my call, I thanked the guy as I passed it back to him. He also gave me the convenient address to give to the cab company so that I can be picked up efficiently. Once I was in the cab, I had an epiphany.....how ironically sweet that a worker helped me when I needed it. And I have to say and conclude that transient workers really count too in the most unexpected delightful ways. :)

Kim Tiong

Review: “Hard Choices”

In April this year, an ex-civil servant and an author released a book about Singapore that was hailed as ‘brilliant’ by international reviewers¹ and ‘a breath of fresh air’ by local ones.² Donald Low and Sudhir Vadaketh’s *‘Hard Choices’* has been hailed as the liberal alternative to current government ideologies and policies, but with the credibility that stems from coming from within the system. The book covers a range of topics, including concrete ones like housing, healthcare and education as well as more abstract ones like ideology and history. Not surprisingly, it also covers the polemical topic of immigration and foreign workers, and proposes some solutions to perceived problems. When prefacing the book, the authors insisted that their proposals were not the be all and end all of things, but merely triggers for a larger discussion. In good faith, we at TWC2 would like to weigh in, particularly on what they did and did not raise regarding migrant workers.

The first point that the various authors of the book raise is that we should reduce our intake of foreign workers. Donald Low argues that *“all societies have limited capabilities to absorb immigrant”*, and while he does not explicitly state that Singapore has reached its limit, he does detail the various costs of a liberal immigration policy to the country’s physical and social infrastructure.³ Linda Lim elaborates on this idea and discusses how liberal immigration results in stagnant wages and productivity. Though they acknowledge that the government has already *“moved to reduce the country’s intake of low-skilled foreign labour”*, the authors also point out that *“it has not moved as quickly or as far as some would like to see”*.

However, this call for a reduction in migrant workers is also accompanied by a crucial caveat: that we treat them better. According to Donald Low, the Little India riot exposed the weakness of our *“claims to being a diverse, multiracial society”* because *“our current conception of diversity does not extend beyond Singaporeans and permanent residents”*.⁴ Alongside his calls to focus on the welfare of low-wage Singaporeans, he draws on Susan Fainstein’s work and envisions a future Singapore that is a *“just city”* and one that embraces *“social justice”*. For a start, he argues that we should pay migrant workers *“the same wages as Singaporeans doing the same job.”* He also calls for *“more ethical treatment of migrant workers”*, though this is not elaborated. Linda Lim points out that social attitudes are also important, writing that Singaporeans *“despise manual and menial jobs”* and often associate these jobs with migrant workers. The flipside is that Singaporeans who do these jobs are viewed with the same disdain as the migrant workers are. Donald Low is right that if we want to better the lives of Singaporean low-wage workers, we cannot leave out how we treat migrant workers.

Professor Teo You Yenn and other Singaporean academics have echoed this sentiment. In a recent talk, Professor Teo said that the rights and welfare of low-income women are bound up with the rights and welfare of their foreign counterparts: domestic workers. The reason why women who stay home and look after children or the elderly are not rewarded or compensated is bound up with how this same work is valued in other middle and upper class households. Regardless of the spheres, our treatment of our migrant workers has an inextricable impact on how our low-income workers are eventually treated.

As a society, TWC2 does not take a view on how many migrant workers Singapore should employ, but we can see that there are strong arguments for managing their numbers and we’d certainly agree on the need to compensate them fairly. But how might this look? Below are some of the suggestions that TWC2 sent to the government in January this year about how we can do this.

1) Long-term retention of workers

We can reduce the high turnover rate, as a by-product of which the need for more workers will fall. Workers allowed –indeed, incentivised - to stay for longer periods of time, will become more productive and familiar with local customs. Unfortunately, some companies are resistant to this idea because they profit from the existing high turnover rate. The phenomenon of kickbacks is illegal but rampant, especially in industries like construction, where numerous employers take cuts of employees’ salaries in exchange for extending their work visas.⁵ Allowing workers to stay for longer periods, with the opportunity to move to a new employer should the existing one not wish to retain them or tries to demand payment for contract renewal would remove this artificially enhanced income that some companies get from hiring migrant workers, and this would benefit local workers who’ll become less expensive vis-à-vis their foreign counterparts. The companies can benefit from this because they do not have to spend time and money retraining new workers, and might also enjoy higher productivity from their workers because they have acclimatised to working as teams under Singapore’s conditions.

2) Social justice and fair treatment of workers

If we are prepared to pay migrant workers the same as local workers for the same job (as we should be), we must also be prepared to give them the same opportunity to learn and grow as we would low-income Singaporean workers. This can take the shape of allowing them to find work in sectors different to the ones they were initially working in. They too should have access to types of job training so that they can alternate between industries. This will be especially pertinent if Linda Lim’s suggestion that the government desist from the *“microeconomic management of investment allocation through targeted sectoral subsidies”*

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/margaret-heffernan/the-limits-of-ideology-le_b_5895760.html

² <http://www.stasiareport.com/the-big-story/asia-report/singapore/story/thinking-hard-about-spoes-choices-20140829>

³ *Hard Choices*, page 27

⁴ *Hard Choices*, page 215

⁵ <http://twc2.org.sg/2012/08/12/worse-off-for-working-kickbacks-intermediary-fees-and-migrant-construction-workers-in-singapore>

is taken. If the government stops picking winners, then workers in the 'losing' fields, regardless of nationality, should have the opportunity to undergo training to find a job in a new field. If we are serious about urban justice and becoming a just city, our treatment of workers cannot just stop at equal pay.

Likewise, access to decent accommodation cannot just be a matter of increasing the number of checks on workers' dormitories. Ultimately, our society should also embrace sharing space with them, not only space on public transport and the like, but also living spaces like satellite towns. We can even think about their rights to representation. Can we make space within our unions for them to make their voices heard? Equality also means not policing the bodies of domestic workers and what they can or cannot do with them. It means accepting that human beings crave and relish physical touch and respecting their need for companionship, if they do. Respecting migrant workers means allowing them to mingle and marry Singaporeans and PRs without having to ask for permission.

The authors' call for a more equitable Singapore is heartening and definitely something that we at TWC2 agree with. In helping to shape our just city, let us hope that our definition of 'just' does not become as watered down as our definitions of diversity.

Edwina Shaddick (Volunteer with TWC2)

"Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus" by Donald Low and Sudhir Vadaketh, with contributions by Linda Lim and Thum Ping Tjin is published by NUS Press. 256 pages, S\$24.

International Migrants Day 2014: TWC2 Statement

International Migrants Day (December 18th) is an occasion for celebrating migrant workers' contributions to the societies where they are employed and to those from which they came. It is also an occasion for reflecting on progress towards achieving the realisation of their rights.

Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) is acutely aware of the problems migrants face as a result of the cost of the recruitment process. Male workers typically take over a year to pay off their debt; domestic workers normally face over six months of salary deductions before they can send money home. This imposes hardships on their families and stress on the workers themselves. It inhibits them from raising complaints or appealing for help if they think their rights have been violated, as they particularly fear being fired and sent home by their employers while still in debt.

TWC2 recognises the issue of intermediary charges as a problem that needs to be dealt with in both countries of origin and of destination as a matter of urgency. We call for efforts at national and regional levels to significantly reduce the level of such charges in the coming year.

As of 1st January 2015, all domestic workers should be covered by employment contracts that assert their right to a weekly day off. A large proportion will clearly still have no days off because the current policy on a mandatory day off allows employers to agree with domestic workers that they should give up days off in return for extra pay. Most new workers are in no position to refuse these terms. TWC2 believes that further steps are needed to protect the right to a regular day off. At the very least, half of the weekly days off to which domestic workers are entitled each month should be non-negotiable, in order to ensure rest, a change of scene and access to the outside world for every domestic worker.

International Migrants Day marks the occasion when the United Nations passed the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW / Migrant Workers Convention). The convention will be 25 years old in a year's time, but so far, only 47 states have ratified it. Migrant Forum in Asia, a coalition of Asian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that campaigns for the rights of migrant workers, is making a renewed push for more ratifications over the next 12 months. TWC2 calls for Singapore to move forward in bringing its laws and practices concerning migrant workers into line with the provisions of this convention with a view, eventually, to signing it.

This year, TWC2 marked IMD early, on Sunday 7th December. *Lunch With Heart* was a celebration both of IMD and of TWC2's 10th anniversary as a society. It took place in a Little India restaurant: a report, with photos can be seen at:

<http://twc2.org.sg/2014/12/08/hive-of-activity-as-twc2-crosses-into-second-decade/>

Opening the celebration, TWC2 president, Dr Russell Heng, reflected on how TWC2 had started out as a small group of people who wanted better conditions for migrant workers, but who had no plan for how they were going to go about achieving that, and now the society has grown into an organisation that directly assists around 3000 workers every year. Among our current projects, The Cuff Road Project provides daily meals for around 300 workers; we assist seriously ill or injured workers with shelter while they recuperate; this year, for the first time, we have also been able to shelter domestic workers who needed to leave their employers and help them resolve their complaints.

Dr Heng looked forward to the society meeting challenges that may come in its second decade.

Migrant Workers Convention: New Push for Ratification

18 December 2015 marks the 25th Anniversary of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICRMW / Migrant Workers Convention). The occasion is a perfect opportunity for the migrants' rights movement to magnify our advocacy for further ratification of the only Convention that specifically guarantees the human rights of all migrant workers and members of their families. Hence, let us make December 2014 – December 2015 Migrants' Year and popularize the campaign to:

Step It Up: Dignity, Rights, Development
Marking 25 Years of the UN Migrant Workers' Convention

Migrant Forum in Asia is renewing its efforts to encourage more countries to ratify the United Nations' Migrant Workers Convention. In a message sent to affiliates recently, it says:

This theme resonates with our continuous struggles to achieve decent work and dignity in the workplace, to realize human rights for all, and advocate for rights-based approaches to development.

To date, there are 47 States that ratified the Migrant Workers Convention. Among the core international human rights treaties, this Convention is the least ratified. It is crucial in a highly globalized and interconnected world for countries of origin, transit and destination to recognize the significance of the Migrant Workers Convention and share responsibilities in protecting the rights of all people in their territories, including migrant workers and members of their families.



In Brief

Increased Protection for Migrant Workers in the Gulf Region?

Labour ministers from the Arab countries of the Gulf region met counterparts from other Asian countries that are home to most of their migrant labour force in Kuwait on 26-27th November. They agreed on measures to improve the position of migrant workers, including organizing pre-departure orientation programmes, protections for full and timely payment of salaries (including mandatory payment of workers' salaries into bank accounts) and faster dispute resolution.

Before the conference, the ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries agreed on minimum terms for domestic workers' contracts which, if actually brought into full scale use, would make a big difference to their employment in the region. The terms include the rights to a weekly day off, annual leave and to live away from their employers' homes. The working day is to be fixed at eight hours.

Ahead of the meeting, ninety international and national NGOs signed a joint statement calling on the ministers to improve labour protections for migrant workers, including overhauling the kafala (sponsorship) system. From Singapore, both HOME and TWC2 signed. The full statement can be read on the Migrant Forum in Asia website at: <http://www.mfasia.org/home/534-gulf-countries-increase-migrant-worker-protection/>



Transient Workers Count Too

• Society Registration No: ROS 0117/2004 WEL • Charity Registration No: 01971 • Unique Entity No: T04SS0088C • Member of National Council of Social Service • NVPC New Non-Profit Initiative Award 2005 • American Women's Association Woman of the Year Award 2011 • Rotary Club of Singapore Good Samaritan 2011 Award •

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TO HELP ENSURE TWC2 CONTINUES ITS WORK TO RAISE AWARENESS AND IMPROVE CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANT WORKERS, PLEASE CONSIDER SUPPORTING OUR WORK THROUGH A DONATION. YOU COULD SEND A CHEQUE, DO A BANK TRANSFER (details below), or LOG ON TO THE WEBSITE and donate through the fundraising portals sggives.org or give.sg.

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