



Sweet victory, Bitter outcome

Fairness and effectiveness of the salary
claims process at TADM and the ECT
April 2026

EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS TRIBUNALS
CLAIM NO: ECT/10539/2020
ORDER NO: ECT/ORC/80687/2020

...Claimant(s)

Between BILLAL

And HI-BU

ORDER

This Claim having been called for Hearing before the TRIBUNAL MAGISTRATE, DORA TAY,
AND UPON HEARING the Claimant(s) and the Respondent(s),
IT IS ORDERED that:-

(1) The Respondent(s) do pay the Claimant(s) the sum of S\$13,262.74 for:-
(a) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/12/2019 to 31/03/2020 at S\$1200;
(b) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/12/2019 to 31/03/2020 at S\$587.4;
(c) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/12/2019 to 31/03/2020 at S\$587.4;

[TOTAL: S\$13,262.74] by 10 August 2020 accordingly.

NOT PAID by due date

Dated: 07 August 2020

THE SEAL OF THE STATE COURTS
SINGAPORE

Order No: ECT/ORC/80687/2020
Page 1 of 1

EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS TRIBUNALS
CLAIM NO: ECT/10462/2025
ORDER NO: ECT/ORC/81121/2025

...Claimant(s)

Between BILLAL

And HI-BU

ORDER

This Claim having been called for Hearing before the TRIBUNAL MAGISTRATE, DORA TAY,
AND UPON HEARING the Claimant(s) and the Respondent(s),
IT IS ORDERED that:-

(1) The Respondent(s) do pay the Claimant(s) the sum of S\$15,500.00 for:-
(a) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/01/2024 to 30/11/2024 at S\$15,500.00;

[TOTAL: S\$15,500.00] by 24 November 2025 accordingly.

NOT PAID by due date

Dated: 06 November 2025

THE SEAL OF THE STATE COURTS
SINGAPORE

EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS TRIBUNALS
CLAIM NO: ECT/1416/2025
ORDER NO: ECT/ORC/81292/2025

...Claimant(s)

Between KAU

And SUNSHINE OVERSEAS CONSULTANTS PTE. LTD.

ORDER OF TRIBUNAL

This Claim having been called for Case Management Conference before the TRIBUNAL MAGISTRATE, DORA TAY,
AND UPON HEARING the Claimant(s) via video conferencing, and the Respondent(s) appearing,
IT IS ORDERED that:-

(1) The Respondent(s) do pay the Claimant(s) the sum of S\$10,205.96 for:-
(a) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/04/2025 to 23/06/2025 at S\$4,549.50;
(b) Employment Act (EA) - Payment under s38(4) EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/04/2025 to 23/06/2025 at S\$5,027.09; and
(c) Employment Act (EA) - Paid holiday (on a public holiday) from 01/04/2025 to 23/06/2025 at S\$629.37;

and disbursements of S\$60.00 [TOTAL: S\$10,265.96] by 16 December 2025 accordingly.

Claimant(s) may enforce the order accordingly.

NOT PAID by due date

Dated: 16 December 2025

THE SEAL OF THE STATE COURTS
SINGAPORE

EMPLOYMENT CLAIMS TRIBUNALS
CLAIM NO: ECT/11095/2025
ORDER NO: ECT/ORC/80435/2026

...Claimant(s)

Between SETH

And L.K.MAJUS TRADING CO PTE. LTD.

ORDER OF TRIBUNAL

This Claim having been called for Hearing before the TRIBUNAL MAGISTRATE, DORA TAY,
AND UPON HEARING the Claimant(s) and the Respondent(s),
IT IS ORDERED that:-

(1) The Respondent(s) do pay the Claimant(s) the sum of S\$20,000.00 for :-
(a) Employment Act (EA) - Payment of salary in accordance with s21, 22 or 23 EA (2nd Sch., item 17) from 01/07/2024 to 31/05/2025 at S\$20,000.00;

[TOTAL: S\$20,000.00] by 26 March 2026, failing which the Claimant(s) may enforce the order accordingly.

Dated: 12 March 2026

NOT PAID by due date

THE SEAL OF THE STATE COURTS
SINGAPORE

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April 2026

I. Executive summary

This report examines how fair the salary claims process administered by the Ministry of Manpower’s Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM) is in practice. It focuses particularly on whether legal victories translate into meaningful financial outcomes for migrant workers who file salary claims. Whilst Singapore’s salary claims framework crucially provides a formal avenue for dispute resolution, this study finds that significant gaps remain between legal recognition and material outcomes, due to the high incidence of employer insolvency or abscondment.

The findings of this report draw from qualitative interviews conducted by the researcher during her internship at Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). The researcher interviewed three groups of workers whose salary claims reached different conclusions:

- (1) workers who settled during mediation for less than the amount they had initially claimed;
- (2) workers who obtained favourable rulings from the Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT) but received no payment due to employer bankruptcy or abscondment; and
- (3) workers who similarly obtained favourable ECT rulings and whose employers were also uncontactable or bankrupt, but who received partial or full compensation through the security bond insurance mechanism.

By analysing outcomes across these groups, this report highlights how the practical enforcement of legal victories through wage recovery shapes workers’ experience of fairness more than procedural access alone.

The findings show that the unenforceability of Tribunal Orders (TOs) is a central weakness of the current system. Many workers interviewed who had “won” their cases were ultimately unable to recover the full wages they were owed, as they lacked the financial means to pursue enforcement and had limited access to institutional

support. This enforcement gap not only undermines the practical value of legal rulings but also influences workers' behaviour earlier in the claims process. Faced with prolonged unemployment and uncertainty, many workers described feeling pressure to accept reduced settlements during the mediation stage, simply to secure some concrete payment and to return to work as quickly as possible.

This report also finds that workers face significant hardship whilst their cases are ongoing. During this period, most workers are unable to work and earn an income, and support from former employers is often minimal or entirely absent.

Even in the rare cases where workers eventually recovered the full amounts they were owed, these sums were often insufficient to make up for months of lost income and the debt they accumulated during the claims process.

Faced with the prospect of a long period of unemployment and the resulting opportunity cost, some workers are discouraged from engaging with the salary claims process completely.

Within the salary claims context, the security bond insurance mechanism emerged as one of the few institutional tools capable of converting legal entitlements into actual compensation. For eligible Work Permit holders, it was often the only reason they received any payment after employer non-compliance. However, this report finds that access to this mechanism remains partial and uneven. Furthermore, S-Pass holders are completely excluded from security bond coverage, leaving them especially vulnerable during salary disputes, as compared to Work Permit holders.

Based on these findings, the report argues that improving fairness in the salary claims process requires strengthening mechanisms that support practical enforceability and income continuity during ongoing salary disputes. A policy reform which is both reasonably feasible and impactful, would be the extension of security bond insurance coverage to include S-Pass holders, as this would directly address the enforcement gap between S-Pass holders and Work Permit holders. In addition, modest measures

such as the provision of interim financial support or broader access to temporary work authorisation could significantly reduce the pressures faced by workers during ongoing salary disputes.

Overall, this report concludes that while Singapore's salary claims system provides formal avenues for redress, its current design places much of the financial risk of enforcement on migrant workers themselves. Strengthening and expanding existing mechanisms, such as security bond insurance and the Change of Employer scheme would represent a pragmatic step towards ensuring that legal rights are not only recognised but meaningfully realised in practice.

II. Background

2.1 Justification for research

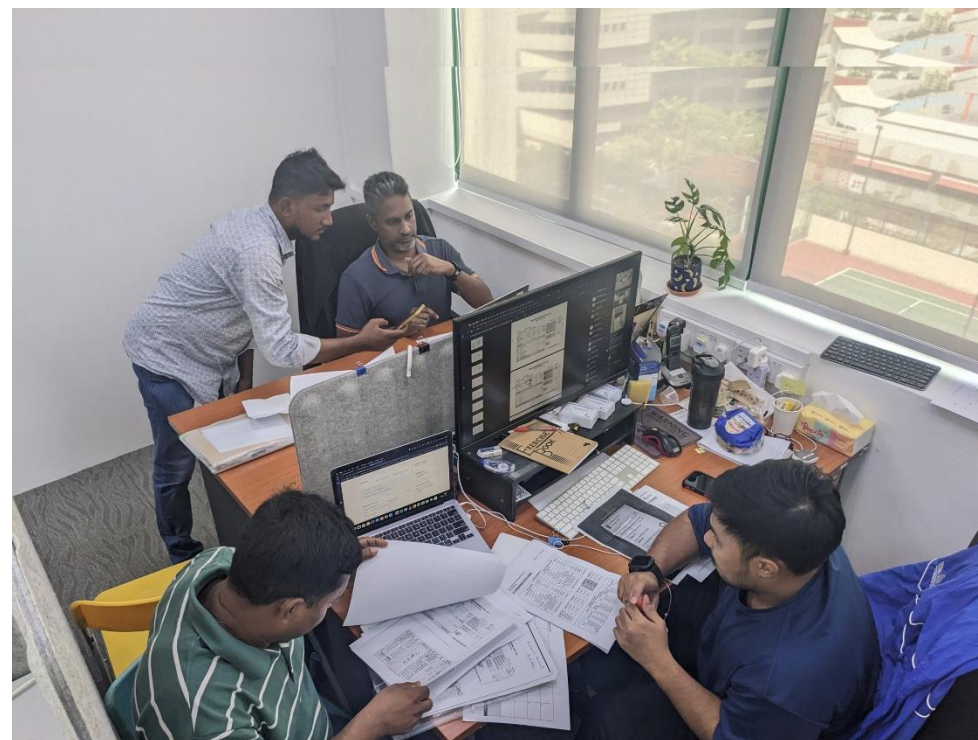
Salary-related employment disputes are one of the most common forms of labour conflict faced by low-income migrant workers in Singapore. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) provides a formal dispute resolution pathway through the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM) and the Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT). MOM defines mediation as "a process that aims to help resolve disputes and assist both parties to arrive at a fair outcome based on legal and contractual obligations."¹ Hence, this report aims to investigate how fair the salary claims process is in practice, especially for workers whose employers refuse or are unable to comply with legal rulings. Here, we define 'fairness' as the degree to which workers obtain the practical outcomes they are entitled to. Thus, this report seeks to examine the extent to which

¹ <https://www.tal.sg/tadm/mediation-guide-3#>

legal recognition translates into meaningful wage recovery, and how actual or expected outcomes from the salary claims process in turn shape the behaviours of migrant workers.

This study focuses specifically on salary-related claims, which typically involve unpaid basic salary, overtime pay, or notice pay. Although the salary claims framework is designed to be accessible and efficient, an assessment of its effectiveness must take into account not only procedural access, but also the enforceability of legal rulings, as well as the material conditions faced by workers during the dispute process. As such, fairness cannot be assessed solely by whether workers are able to file claims or obtain legal rulings but must also consider whether they are able to materially recover the wages they are owed and continue to meet their basic needs during the dispute resolution process.

The motivation for this research emerged from the author's three-month internship with Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), a non-governmental organisation which supports migrant workers facing employment disputes, most commonly salary or injury-related disputes. During this period, the author worked closely with workers navigating salary claims and witnessed firsthand the emotional and financial toll caused by the unenforceability of Tribunal Orders (TOs). Many workers expressed deep frustration and distress upon learning that a favourable legal outcome did not necessarily lead to wage recovery, particularly when employers had absconded or declared bankruptcy. These experiences highlighted a disconnect between formal legal pathways and workers' lived realities, thus prompting this further inquiry into how the salary claims system functions in practice.



Two migrant workers with salary claims consulting with their TWC2 case officers over their evidence

Against this backdrop, this report aims to assess how fair the TADM-administered salary claims process is, drawing on the lived experiences of migrant workers who have navigated the system and obtained varying outcomes. By examining cases where workers settled for reduced amounts, obtained unenforceable Tribunal Orders, or received partial compensation through the security bond insurance mechanism, this study seeks to identify structural gaps in the enforcement of salary claims. In doing so, it also considers which policy mechanisms could be strengthened or

expanded to mitigate the economic and emotional harms faced by workers during ongoing salary disputes.

2.2 Overview of the process for salary disputes

The process of claiming unpaid salary occurs through the Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) Tripartite Alliance for Dispute Management (TADM). It follows a structured pathway designed to encourage early resolution, provide mediation support, and, if necessary, escalate unresolved disputes to the Employment Claims Tribunals (ECT). This process involves the claimant: the party who files a claim with TADM, and the respondent: the party whom the claim is filed against. Neither party is allowed to be represented by a lawyer during mediation.²

The entire process, from e-Negotiation to ECT filing, usually takes six months or less. However, at any stage of the process, the worker can choose to accept the employer's offer, which would automatically close the case.

Upon filing a claim, workers will typically find their work passes cancelled by the employer, often out of pique. Since they have an ongoing case, MOM will issue these workers with Special Passes, enabling them to legally stay in Singapore whilst the claim proceeds. Unless the worker prefers to go home rather than look for a new job in Singapore, the TADM Officer will generally issue the claimant with a 'transfer letter' under the Change of Employer scheme (COE) if they are a work permit holder. This allows the worker to move to a new employer even whilst the salary claim process is ongoing, although, as described in the TWC2 research report *The Rocky Road to a*

Transfer,³ getting a new job presents another set of difficulties and many workers are not successful.⁴

Additionally, the employer must provide food and housing for work permit holders. However, this is not applicable for S-Pass holders, who are not permitted to work during if they are on Special Passes, and whose (former) employers are also not obliged to provide them with accommodation.

TWC2 assists clients by guiding them through each stage of the dispute resolution process to conclusion. This includes using our in-house salary calculation tool to assist clients in calculating their claim amounts, as well as compiling the evidence required to make a strong case.⁵

² Ibid

³ <https://twc2.org.sg/2025/09/02/the-rocky-road-to-a-transfer/>

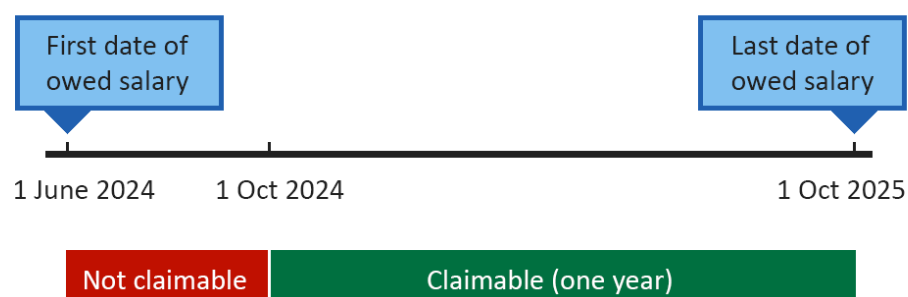
⁴ <https://twc2.org.sg/2025/12/05/parliamentary-questions-september-2025-part-3-change-of-employer-letters/>

⁵ <https://twc2.org.sg/what-we-do/social-work/>

Claim Period

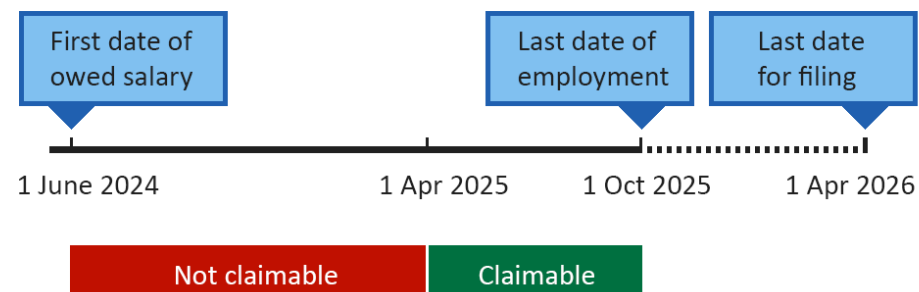
Under the Employment Claims Act, the claimant can only claim salary for a period of twelve months prior to the date of filing. For example, if a claim is filed on 1 October 2025, the claimant can only claim their salary from 1 October 2024, and not for any period prior to that.⁶

Claimable period



If the employee has already left employment, the claim must be filed within 6 months from their last date of employment. For example, if their last date of employment was 1 Oct 2025, a claim must be filed by 1 April 2026. In this case, the eligible claim period would be from 1 April 2025 to 1 October 2025,⁷ a period of only six months.

Effect of late filing



Salary Claim Stages

Step 1: e-Negotiation

Claimants begin the process by attempting to resolve the dispute privately via the TADM online platform:

- The claimant logs in to the TADM website to initiate the process. If the claim amount is known, a claim can be filed online for mediation directly. Otherwise, the claimant must go down to the MOM office.

⁶ <https://www.tal.sg/tadm/mediation-guide-3#>

⁷ Ibid

- If the claimant is a union member and the union files the claim on their behalf, they can claim for up to \$30,000. Otherwise, they are subject to a claim limit of \$20,000, as is the case for most claimants. If the claimant is claiming an amount exceeding \$10,000, they must pay a filing fee of \$20. For amounts below that, the filing fee is \$10.
- A one-week e-Negotiation period commences, during which both parties are given the opportunity to attempt to reach a voluntary settlement on the TADM eService dashboard.

Step 2: Online/In-person mediation

If e-Negotiation does not lead to an agreement, TADM arranges a mediation session:

- A TADM employee is assigned as a mediator to facilitate either an online or in-person mediation session.
- Both the claimant and employer are expected to attend this mediation session.
- Mediation sessions can take up to three hours, and multiple sessions may be required. The mediation process typically takes around eight weeks to conclude.
- If both parties can reach a settlement agreement during mediation, the salary claims process can conclude at this stage.

However, if both parties fail to reach a settlement agreement during mediation, the dispute is then escalated to the Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT) of the State Courts.

Step 3: File a claim with the Employment Claims Tribunals (ECT)

- TADM issues a Claim Referral Certificate, enabling the claimant to file a claim via the ECT.
- The claimant has four weeks from receiving the certificate to register the unresolved claim online with the ECT, via the Community Justice and Tribunals System (CJTS).
- Legal representation is not permitted in ECT matters, and both claimants and employers are expected to act on their own behalf.
- Claimants who need access to computers can use the Business Centre at the State Courts, or if assisted by TWC2, can attend their ECT hearings via Zoom using a computer in the TWC2 office.

2.3 Overview of the Security Bond mechanism

In Singapore, employers hiring non-Malaysian Work Permit holders are required to purchase a security bond of \$5,000 for each worker as a condition of their work permit.⁸ A security bond is a legally binding guarantee, issued by a bank or insurer in favour of the Ministry of Manpower – on condition that the employer complies with the conditions of a Work Permit. This includes paying salaries on time, providing accommodation, and covering a worker's repatriation at the end of their employment. If an employer fails to meet these obligations through failing to pay wages, for example, MOM may forfeit the bond and use the bond funds to compensate the worker or cover other liabilities.

⁸ <https://www.mom.gov.sg/passes-and-permits/work-permit-for-foreign-worker/sector-specific-rules/security-bond>

In the context of salary claims, the security bond can serve as an alternate mechanism for wage recovery when an employer is insolvent, uncontactable, or otherwise non-compliant. Workers whose employers have absconded or declared bankruptcy may receive compensation through the bond rather than directly from the employer, as was the case for the workers in group 3 in the Appendix. However, because the bond amount is capped at \$5,000 per worker, its effectiveness is limited to smaller claim amounts. This mechanism of wage recovery thus cannot be applied to cases in which the salary claim exceeds \$5,000. As a result, whilst the security bond does provide a vital safety net for some Work Permit holders, it does not fully address the enforceability gaps identified in this study.

- Group 1: Workers who filed a salary claim but settled for a lower amount than initially claimed.
- Group 2: Workers whose cases proceeded to the Employment Claims Tribunals (ECT), where they obtained a favourable tribunal order (TO) but received none of the money owed.
- Group 3: Workers who obtained an ECT tribunal order and received either partial or full payment of the awarded salary

These categories allowed for comparison across different outcomes within the salary dispute resolution process.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Research design and justification

This study draws on 17 qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with migrant workers in Singapore. All participants were migrant workers who had experienced salary disputes with their employers and had engaged with formal salary recovery mechanisms. The aim of the interviews was to understand workers' experiences navigating these processes and the outcomes they received.

Participant Groups

Workers were recruited into three groups based on the trajectory and outcome of their salary claims:

Recruitment and Interview Procedures

All interviewees were current or former beneficiaries of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). Participants were identified through the researcher's role as an intern at TWC2, which provided access to workers who had ongoing or completed salary claims. Interviews were conducted either:

- In person at the TWC2 office,
- In person at Dayspace, TWC2's shelter facility, or
- Online via WhatsApp Call, in cases where workers had already returned to their countries of origin.

All interviews were conducted individually using a semi-structured guide. This format allowed for consistency across interviews whilst enabling the content of each interview to be dynamically shaped by interviewees' answers, allowing them to expand on their experiences in greater depth.

Where possible, interviews were conducted in English. In cases where interviewees did not have a sufficient grasp of English, in-house translators from Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) assisted with interpretation.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were particularly important given the vulnerability of the interviewees and the ongoing nature of many cases. Prior to each interview, the purpose of the research was explained, verbal consent was obtained, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions or withdraw at any point without consequence. Identifying details will be excluded or anonymised to protect participants' confidentiality, and pseudonyms will be used where necessary.

Data Recording and Analysis

During each interview, detailed written notes were taken. These notes form the primary data source for analysis. After data collection, the interview notes were thematically coded, following an inductive approach. Codes were developed iteratively to identify recurring patterns, experiences, and concerns across the three respondent groups. Themes emerging from this process were used to structure the findings of this report and highlight contrasts between different case outcomes.

Reflexivity

This study was conducted while the author was interning as a caseworker at Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). It is therefore crucial to acknowledge how the author's positionality shaped the research process and results obtained. On one hand, being embedded within TWC2 enabled easy access to workers who were navigating the salary claims process. Additionally, it may have facilitated trust-building with participants, allowing them to feel more comfortable sharing their experiences. On the other hand, the author's dual role as caseworker and researcher required careful

reflexivity as in some cases, prior involvement in workers' cases carried the risk of introducing preconceptions or biased narratives.

To mitigate this, the author made conscious efforts to make interviews as open-ended and worker-led as possible, allowing participants to define which aspects of their experiences they wished to emphasise. Where possible, emerging observations were discussed informally with more experienced TWC2 staff in order to better contextualise individual accounts and reduce the risk of overgeneralisation based on casework exposure. Care was taken to ensure that participation in the study did not interfere with casework support or create unrealistic expectations about legal outcomes. By remaining attentive to the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, this study sought to balance the benefits of insider access with a reflective research approach.

IV. Findings

4.1 There is a critical lack of enforcement mechanisms for Tribunal Orders (TOs)

A key finding from the interviews was the practical unenforceability of Tribunal Orders (TOs). Even when workers successfully obtained a legal ruling in their favour from the Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT), it remained almost impossible to enforce. Many workers described situations in which their employers had either filed for bankruptcy or absconded; becoming uncontactable after the TO was issued. Hence, whilst the issuance of a TO formally recognises the legitimacy of a worker's claim, it does not guarantee the recovery of owed wages, resulting in a legal victory which carries little

material value. This highlights a critical gap between legal recognition and material outcomes in salary cases, which results from a lack of enforcement mechanisms.

None of the workers interviewed had the financial means to hire a private lawyer to pursue enforcement action independently. As such, once their employer failed to comply with the TO, their only option was to turn to institutional intermediaries such as the Migrant Workers' Centre (MWC). However, we found that access to such support was uneven and constrained. Some workers were turned away despite possessing valid TOs, due to MWC assessing the likelihood of successful wage recovery as being too low. This is exacerbated by our observation that MWC is facing increasing resource constraints, thus creating a need to prioritise cases with higher prospects of recovery. This thus creates a situation in which legal entitlement exists in theory but is practically unenforceable for a substantial proportion of claimants.

The perceived impossibility of enforcement also significantly shapes workers' behaviour earlier in the dispute process. Workers in Group 1, who settled for amounts lower than their original claims, frequently explained that they accepted reduced settlements because they believed that pursuing the full amount would ultimately yield nothing. Interviewees frequently expressed that it was better to "take what they can get", prioritising certainty over fairness. In several cases, this logic was reinforced by TADM officers, who advised workers to accept lower settlements rather than risk winning a TO that could not be enforced. Whilst such advice may be pragmatic given existing constraints, it underscores how systemic weaknesses effectively pressure workers into compromising their legal entitlements.

Beyond financial loss, the inability to enforce TOs has profound emotional and social consequences. Several interviewees recounted the emotional trajectory of feeling initial relief and happiness upon receiving a TO, followed by the profound disappointment of realising that no meaningful action could be taken to recover their owed wages. Many workers are the primary or sole breadwinners for their families, and have also taken on substantial loans – often with high interest rates – in order to pay the agency fees required to come to Singapore. Hence many interviewees described how the failure to recover their owed wages left them unable to repay these

loans, placing significant strain on their families and even triggering conflict within their communities back home. Interviewees described feelings of distress and helplessness, with some reporting a fear of returning home due to ongoing family disputes. These findings thus suggest that the weak enforcement mechanisms of salary disputes impact not just the individual worker, but also their families in their home countries who rely on their remittances.

4.2 Workers experience significant economic precarity while waiting for case resolution

Another major theme across interviews was that workers' vulnerability is further intensified while waiting for their cases to be resolved. During this period, workers are generally prohibited from working, leaving them without a source of income for months at a time.

For S-Pass holders, the situation was particularly precarious, as their employers are not legally obliged to provide housing or food during an ongoing salary dispute, unlike Work Permit holders. Even amongst the Work Permit holders interviewed however, we found that the assistance they received was minimal; whilst accommodation was mostly provided, food allowances were inconsistent and often insufficient. Several workers described needing to skip meals or rely on ad hoc assistance from NGOs such as TWC2 to meet their basic needs. The inability to earn an income whilst awaiting case resolution emerged as one of the most consistently cited hardships across interviews, as workers often described how this prolonged period of economic insecurity and forced idleness robbed them of a sense of stability and dignity. Hence, this created an intense pressure for workers to resolve their cases as quickly as possible, even where it meant settling for a lower amount than they were initially owed – as was the case for most of the workers in group 1.

Crucially, even in what might be considered “successful” cases where workers eventually received the full amount stated in their TO, as was the case for some of the workers in group 3, we found that the financial impact of their prolonged unemployment was not fully mitigated. The wages recovered rarely compensated for the debt accumulated from months of lost wages and ongoing living expenses incurred during the dispute process. As a result, many remained in financial distress even after receiving payment. This challenges the assumption that full recovery of owed wages equates to financial justice, as it overlooks the opportunity costs and survival expenses borne by workers during the dispute process. Hence, this underscores how procedural delays themselves can function as a form of economic harm.

This urgency to return to work was also a crucial factor that drove workers in Group 1 to accept reduced settlements. For many, the prospect of continued unemployment was more damaging than the sacrifice that comes with accepting a reduced amount quickly. Workers repeatedly emphasised their responsibilities as primary or sole breadwinners, with families back home depending on remittances for daily expenses, medical treatments, or debt repayment. The longer a case dragged on, the more acute this pressure became, ultimately outweighing the pursuit of full compensation. This reflects a broader structural imbalance, as whilst employers can delay or evade payment with limited consequences, workers must bear the full cost of waiting.

4.3 The Security Bond provides partial protection, however significant gaps remain

The introduction of the security bond mechanism – otherwise known as ex-gratia payments – has represented a meaningful, albeit limited, attempt to mitigate the consequences of employer non-compliance. Put simply, this mechanism allows Work Permit holders to receive compensation through their employer’s insurance when wages go unpaid. For eligible Work Permit holders, this mechanism provided tangible

financial relief and in most cases was the only reason they received any money at all after an employer absconded or declared bankruptcy. However, workers also noted that the amounts they received were often insufficient to cover broader losses, such as the income foregone while they were unable to work during the claims process. As such, even where the security bond functioned as intended, it still failed to fully address the economic harm experienced by workers.

More significantly, this mechanism is entirely unavailable to S-Pass holders, who, since they are excluded from security bond coverage, occupy a particularly vulnerable position within the labour migration regime. In theory, S-Pass holders are free to look for subsequent employment even whilst a case is ongoing; in practice, other TWC2 research reports have described a significant degree of prejudice amongst employers against hiring workers who have filed claims against former employers. Moreover, some S-Pass holders have skillsets or have job expectations (e.g. Bangladeshi-cuisine cook) for which there aren’t many job openings. Additionally, as mentioned previously, former employers of S-Pass holders are not legally obliged to provide them with housing and food during an ongoing salary dispute, unlike Work Permit holders. This multifaceted exclusion often places S-Pass holders with salary disputes in a markedly more precarious position than their Work Permit counterparts. Several S-Pass holders interviewed expressed confusion and frustration at this disparity, especially when they observed other Work Permit holders in similar situations receiving partial compensation, housing, meal allowances and a pathway to new jobs.

These findings suggest that while the security bond mechanism is a step in the right direction, it remains inadequate in protection. Expanding its eligibility to S-Pass holders or providing alternative forms of interim financial and employment support for them, could substantially reduce their vulnerability during dispute resolution.

V. Discussion and conclusion

This report set out to assess how fair the salary claims process administered by MOM TADM is in practice, drawing on the lived experiences of migrant workers who navigated the system. To capture variation in outcomes across the claims process, the study focuses on three groups of workers whose salary disputes concluded in different ways. The first group comprised workers who reached an agreement with their employers during the mediation stage but ultimately settled for amounts lower than what they had originally claimed. The second group consisted of workers who obtained favourable Tribunal Orders (TOs) from the Employment Claims Tribunal (ECT) but received no payment because their employers had absconded or declared bankruptcy. The third group similarly obtained favourable TOs and experienced employer abscondment or insolvency, but unlike the second group, received partial or full compensation through the security bond insurance mechanism.

Our findings demonstrate that whilst TADM plays a crucial role in offering workers a formal avenue to seek redress, fairness cannot be assessed solely on the basis of access to mediation or adjudication. Instead, an assessment of fairness must consider whether workers are able to meaningfully recover the full wages they are owed, as well as how the process itself imposes economic and emotional costs on those seeking justice.

Across all three groups of workers interviewed, a central finding was the gap between legal recognition and material outcomes. For many workers, successfully obtaining a Tribunal Order did not translate into actual wage recovery due to employer insolvency or abscondment. The absence of effective enforcement mechanisms, coupled with workers' inability to afford private legal representation, rendered TOs practically unenforceable for almost all claimants. This enforcement gap not only undermines the credibility of the adjudicatory process but also shapes workers' behaviour earlier in the claims process. Faced with the prospect of a practically unenforceable legal

victory, many workers felt compelled to accept reduced settlements, prioritising certainty and immediacy over full and fair compensation.

These findings also highlight how the dispute resolution process itself generates significant economic harm. Workers are generally prohibited from working or unable to find work whilst their cases are ongoing. This leaves them without income and dependent on limited support from employers or NGOs, racking up significant debt in the process.

At the same time, TWC2 case officers have expressed increasing concern over the lengthening period of time between a worker filing a salary claim and a hearing date at the ECT. This may be the result of an increasing caseload at TADM and the ECT. Whatever the reason, procedural delays further exacerbate the financial toll on workers, on top of the stress they face.

Although Work Permit holders with valid claims should be able to get permission from TADM to switch employers through TADM's Change of Employer (COE) scheme, actually landing a new job with a COE in hand is harder said than done, as described in a TWC2 research report *The Rocky Road to a Transfer*.⁹ Likewise, although S-Pass holders are free to look for new jobs even while a claim is progress, success can be elusive. Placements are not always immediately available or the offered salary is too low.

Moreover, even when they can find possible new jobs, agents often demand substantial amounts in recruitment fees, amounts which quite often exceed the legal maximum and yet agents demand such sums with impunity. Workers who had been severely shortpaid or not paid – which was why they filed salary claims – would not have the cash in hand to pay such fees, making it even harder to switch to new jobs.

As a result, a substantial number of workers who file salary claims remain unemployed and without income for extended periods. Pursuing a salary claim therefore frequently involves significant financial and emotional costs, placing

⁹ <https://twc2.org.sg/2025/09/02/the-rocky-road-to-a-transfer/>

workers under greater pressure to accept early, reduced settlements in order to free from anxiety and free to return to work as soon as possible. This pressure is felt greatest among those workers, particularly migrant workers, who have the least by way of financial buffers. In effect, their access to full and fair compensation is compromised, and they are systemically disadvantaged.

Even in the rare cases where workers eventually recovered the full amounts they were owed, these sums were often insufficient to offset the income lost and subsistence costs incurred (often through borrowing from friends) during their prolonged unemployment.

Crucially, in some cases, the opportunity cost of being unable to work may discourage workers from engaging with the salary claims process completely, particularly when the likelihood of meaningful wage recovery is perceived to be low. For them, the formal process laid out for salary claims has no meaning.

Within this context, the security bond insurance mechanism emerges as one of the few institutional features that can translate legal entitlements into material outcomes. For eligible Work Permit holders, it was often the only reason they received any compensation after their employers failed to comply with the Tribunal Order. However, this study finds that the security bond remains an incomplete and uneven solution. The amounts paid out rarely account for the broader economic losses workers incur during the claims process, and the exclusion of S-Pass holders leaves a particularly vulnerable group with no comparable safety net.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving fairness within the salary claims process requires strengthening mechanisms in order to ensure that workers can both enforce their claims and also maintain some form of income generation during the

dispute resolution process. One such reform could be to extend security bond insurance coverage to include S-Pass holders. Doing so would directly address one enforcement gap identified in this study and also reduce the stark differences in outcome between Work Permit and S-Pass holders. This change would build on existing principles of employer responsibility, rather than introduce a major shift in policy. In addition, relatively modest measures could be introduced to reduce hardship during the dispute process, such as expanded facilitation for moving into new jobs, could significantly reduce the pressure on workers to settle prematurely for less than they are owed. By reducing the financial costs of pursuing a claim, such measures would enable workers to make decisions based more on the strength of their case rather than economic desperation. Crucially, such reforms would not weaken incentives for early settlement but rather help to ensure that settlements are genuinely voluntary instead of driven primarily by economic desperation.

Overall, this report demonstrates that whilst Singapore's salary claims system provides formal avenues for workers to seek redress, its current design places much of the financial risk and burden of enforcement on migrant workers themselves. A system that recognises wage theft but cannot reliably enforce wage recovery risks reproducing injustice. Strengthening and expanding existing mechanisms, such as security bond insurance, offers a practical way to narrow the gap between workers' legal rights and their lived realities, allowing us to move closer to a salary claims process that is not only procedurally fair, but substantively just.

VI. Appendix

Anonymised profile of interviewees

Pseudonym	Group	Permit Type	Gender	Amount Claimed	Amount Received	When settlement was received
Yvonne	1	WP	F	\$1,500	\$782	TADM mediation
James	1	WP	M	\$2,400	\$2,000	TADM mediation
Ryan	1	WP	M	\$1,006.13	\$800	TADM mediation
Alice	1	S Pass	F	\$7,010.40	\$5,625.79	TADM e-negotiation
Shaun	2	S Pass	M	\$17,000	\$0	N/A
Isaac	2	S Pass	M	\$16,370.09	\$0	N/A
Steve	2	S Pass	M	\$22,070	\$0	N/A
Alan	2	S Pass	M	\$14,210	\$0	N/A
Nigel	2	S Pass	M	\$10,360.46	\$0	N/A
Mark	2	WP	M	\$3,538.51	\$0	N/A
Matthew	2	S-Pass	M	\$11,146.47	\$0	N/A
Alex	3	WP	M	\$6,263.45	\$4,000	Security bond insurance
Adam	3	WP	M	\$3,200	\$3,200	Security bond insurance
Sam	3	WP	M	\$1,038	\$1,038	Security bond insurance
Joe	3	WP	M	\$2,200	\$2,200	Security bond insurance