

S'pore Trade Associations & Chambers defend migrant worker conditions, highlight contributions to economy

Migrant workers help businesses to grow, which in turn create more jobs for Singaporeans.

Sulaiman Daud | May 27, 05:04 PM



<https://mothership.sg/2020/05/trade-associations-chambers-migrant-workers/>

Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs) in Singapore have come together to release joint statements rebutting calls from the public to reduce the number of migrant workers here.

They also stated that progress has been made in improving the living conditions of migrant workers, and highlighted their importance to Singapore's economy.

Trade associations: Conditions for migrant workers in Singapore are good

In their joint statement, the Singapore Manufacturing Federation (SMF), the Association of Singapore Marine Industries (ASMI) and the Association of Process Industry (ASPRI), asserted that living conditions for such workers in Singapore are not "dire".

They pointed out that the "vast majority" of the migrant workforce voluntarily stay on in Singapore to work after their initial contracts, sometimes for 10 years or more, and encourage their friends back home to work here.

They added that they are proud of the housing system for migrant workers in Singapore, and that the housing and amenities provided are "among the best".

The groups also highlighted that some employers provide healthcare benefits, and migrant workers have channels to address grievances if necessary.

The statement added: "It is in the interest of our employers to ensure that our migrant workers are kept safe, healthy and productive."

The Specialists Trade Alliance of Singapore (STAS), in its own separate statement, said that the regulatory framework for migrant workers in areas like housing, employment privileges, workplace safety and health is robust and has progressively improved over the years.

They also noted that "most employers" comply with these regulations.

TACs: Cutting number of migrant workers will increase costs

These groups opposed calls to reduce the number of migrant workers, with STAS saying, "We hope that the government and Singaporeans will consider the very real implications of these suggestions carefully, and in the longer-term interest of Singaporean jobs and the economy."

It questioned whether Singaporeans could bear "higher costs and inconveniences" if there were fewer migrant workers.

The Singapore Contractors Association Ltd (SCAL), the trade association representing the construction industry, said in a separate statement that cutting the number of migrant workers would lead to an increase in construction costs. It added:

"An increase in construction cost will also have a trickle-down effect and cause housing prices to rise. Lower FW manpower will mean that housing projects such as HDB flats will not only be more expensive but also take a longer time to build."

TACs: Migrant workers help Singapore's economy to grow

STAS added that migrant workers have helped businesses to grow, thereby creating more Professional, Managers, Executives and Technicians (PMET) jobs for Singaporeans.

The ethnic chambers in Singapore echoed this sentiment.

The Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SICCI), the Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SMCCI), and the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) released their own joint statement.

It said that given Singapore's limited workforce, migrant workers helped some economic sectors stay competitive.

"Unlike most countries, we are an ageing society with no hinterland to draw workers from. Migrant workers take on many of the lower-end jobs in Singapore. This allows the vast majority of Singaporeans to take on PMET jobs, and help in creating an innovation-based economy as well."

SMF, ASMI and ASPRI added: "To keep up with the production capacity as a key contributor to the nation's GDP, manufacturers are grateful for the access to the pool of foreign labour."

It said there was a "limited pool of Singaporeans" joining the heavy engineering industry, so they are "fortunate" to have migrant workers to augment the total workforce.

What should be done?

The ethnic chambers supported the government's efforts to test all migrant workers, so that those affected by Covid-19 can get treatment and are fit to return to work after recovery.

STAS said its industry is working with the government to address the spread of Covid-19 among the workers, and added:

"We would like to assure Singaporeans that our employers are responsible to their migrant workers and will continue to be.

We believe that Singaporeans will look beyond the unfair characterisations of employers by certain segments in the discussions on Covid-19."

SCAL said that it "strongly disapproved" of employers or dorm operators who do not provide proper accommodation, welfare and working conditions for workers. It added:

"As responsible employers, we will continue to do our part for our FWs and do our best to ensure that their living conditions are safe and of a good standard. We hope that these efforts will not be overlooked.

We also wish to thank the various donors and volunteer groups who have come forward to address the concerns and needs of our FWs."

Who is calling for a reduction in the migrant workforce?

The issue of migrant worker dorms' conditions, and how it relates to the Covid-19 outbreak, has become the topic *du jour*.

But the statements by the TACs do not directly cite where these "unfair characterisations of employers" come from.

The joint statement by SMF, ASPRI and ASMI also said:

"Following reports of the Covid-19 outbreak among the migrant worker community here in Singapore, there have also been calls by some non-governmental organisations to reduce the number of migrant workers in Singapore."

But it did not name these organisations.

The statement by SCAL mentioned, "There have been calls by some non-governmental organisations for a reduction in the number of FWs in Singapore," but also did not name these organisations.

Transient Workers Count Too, a non-profit organisation working to improve conditions for migrant workers, released a statement on April 8 about the Covid-19 situation in Singapore.

It called for more Covid-19 testing and asked the government to be mindful of loopholes that could be exploited by unscrupulous employers.

However, it did not call for a reduction in the number of migrant workers itself.

HealthServe, another non-profit working to help migrant workers, has released useful information on how migrant workers can maintain their hygiene and safeguard their health, but has not released a statement calling for a reduction in the number of migrant workers here.

Instead, an opinion piece published by *The Straits Times* by the NUS Department of Economics on May 8, 2020 laid out some pointers on how Singapore could reduce its reliance on foreign labour, such as "full costing" foreign labour and to exit or shrink industries like landscaping.

A commentary piece by Eugene Tan, Associate Professor and former Nominated Member of Parliament published by *Today* on April 24 asked whether Singapore's "heavy reliance on cheap, transient foreign labour is a sustainable economic formula".

Social media and online forum discussions calling for the reduction in foreign labour are ubiquitous.

Mothership has contacted SMF, ASPRI, ASMI and SCAL, as well as TWC2, HealthServe, and HOME for comment, and will update once we receive a reply.