

1 December 2012

Remarks by Acting Minister for Manpower Mr Tan Chuan-Jin

On the actions taken against the SMRT bus drivers involved in the illegal strike

1. This is an update on the actions taken by the Singapore Government against the SMRT bus drivers who were involved in the illegal strike.

2. This is a serious matter and we have been very deliberate and very measured in our actions. The Government has taken into account the roles that the bus drivers played in the illegal strike and the recalcitrance of the bus drivers who participated in the strike on the second day, despite the Government's best efforts to persuade them to abort their plans and return to work.

3. Foreign nationals should abide by the laws of their host countries. Singaporeans who work and live overseas are also expected to do so. Laws must be upheld. The Government will take firm action against any illegal strikes, regardless of the nationality of the strikers. Workers, whether local or foreign, clearly violate the law if they go on an illegal strike in Singapore, and will face the consequences of their illegal action – just like these SMRT drivers.

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4. While we acknowledge that many of these bus drivers participated in the strike in the heat of the moment and recognize there are various grievances raised by the workers, their actions remain illegal. MOM has separately called on SMRT to fully address the issues raised by the workers.

5. Investigations were extensive and thorough, in due accordance with the law. We also sought to ensure this is done in a fair and balanced way, while ensuring firm action against those who broke the law – to preserve Singapore's industrial harmony and

maintain the tripartite relationship which remains the hallmark of our industrial landscape. The conduct of illegal strikes by the SMRT bus drivers disrupted our public transport services and Singapore's industrial harmony.

6. While we took action to charge 4 bus drivers earlier this week for engaging in a conspiracy to instigate others to participate in the strike, another driver will be charged on Monday for involvement in the strike. Another 29 workers have also been sternly warned by Police for participating in the illegal strike, and have had their Work Permits revoked. The Immigration Checkpoints Authority will also be repatriating them. Police warnings will be issued to the remaining bus drivers who participated in the strike, as they showed remorse over their actions, or were even coerced into participating. Therefore, the Singapore Government will take no further action against this group of workers, and they will be allowed to remain and work in Singapore, so long as they continue to abide by our laws.

7. As with all incidents involving foreign nationals, we would keep their Embassies informed. We have similarly done so with the PRC Embassy. They are aware of the situation. We have explained to them the need to deal with the matter in accordance with our law, as what the workers did was clearly illegal and unacceptable. This is not just a labour dispute, it was an illegal strike. The individuals who are to be prosecuted and those to be repatriated will be accorded the due process of law. We will continue to work closely with the PRC Embassy to render them any assistance that they may need.

On Labour Relations

8. What the workers did was wrong and illegal – however, SMRT, as the employer, could have done better in managing their labour grievances and concerns. We have met and spoken with SMRT senior management to fully address the outstanding issues, including labour grievances raised by the workers. I have also personally spoken to

SMRT top management and they have assured me they will be looking into these issues. In addition, I reminded them that SMRT must take steps to ensure that a severe breakdown in labour relations like what we saw this week does not happen again. I have received SMRT's commitment that the company has already been taking steps to improve labour relations and will continue to do so, working with the union.

9. As part of good management and HR practices, companies should always ensure lines of communication are kept open and that they have proper grievance handling procedures in place. Companies should not allow labour grievances to fester over a period of time. This is also a good and timely reminder, not just for SMRT, but for all companies to reflect on their management practices, the way they engage and look after their workers. It is not just about foreign workers but our own local workers as well. It is about basic corporate social responsibility. The Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) will be issuing a very timely advisory to its members on this next week.

Conclusion

10. There are many bus drivers, whether local or foreign, who continue to work hard, diligently and conscientiously discharging their duties every day bearing Singaporeans to and fro. All employees in Singapore, local or foreign, play an important role as responsible workers, as members of society, contributing in many ways which we often take for granted. So, while we may all have our individual perspectives on the incident, it is important for Singaporeans to be respectful in the way we respond. It would be remiss of us to just generalise about certain groups of people in a less than responsible way. We do need to respect those who continue to work hard to perform their duties.

11. On that note, I would also like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the Police, MHA and MOM officers who took part in this operation. I would also like to thank SMRT bus drivers who took over while fellow colleagues went on strike. With the repatriation, they will continue to play a key role during this somewhat challenging time for public transport operators, but I have been assured by my colleague Josephine that the Transport Ministry and operators have plans in place to deal with the situation.

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Chinese remarks by Minister of State for Finance and Transport

这次的非法罢工是一起严重的事件。

政府是经过深思熟虑后才采取行动。

考虑的因素包括巴士车长们在这次非法罢工中所扮演的角色，

以及他们是否在政府的劝说后愿意终止计划，回到工作岗位。

这次SMRT巴士车长们的非法罢工影响了公共交通服务和新加坡的工业和谐。

虽然有很多车长可能是在一时冲动之下参与非法罢工，SMRT在沟通和处理方面也有欠理想，车长们的行为仍然是违法的。政府因此必须采取行动。

调查工作是广泛和彻底的。我们以公正和公平的方式进行调查，确保那些触犯法律的人士面对应有的惩罚，以维护新加坡的工业和谐与劳资政关系。

政府认为雇主和雇员都有义务做出最大的努力，妥善处理任何纠纷，维持和谐的工业关系。

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Speech by Minister of State for Finance and Transport

- MOT's focus is to ensure that bus services remain operational and to minimise inconvenience to commuters.
- With the repatriation of the SMRT drivers, we are expecting a slight degradation of service. All bus services continue to run, with SMRT bus services expected to run at about 95 percent of normal levels.
- We have the support from SBST and private operators to maintain bus service levels during this period. These are experienced bus drivers with Class 4 licences. They have started their training today and will be ready to be deployed from a week's time. In the meantime, SMRT will be calling back off-duty drivers and its training instructors to maintain bus service levels. This arrangement will be in place for the next two to three months until SMRT is able to recruit more drivers and train them.
- This episode is regrettable but also a timely reminder that organisations such as SMRT, which provides essential public transport services, must handle its human resource matters carefully, provide open lines of communication with employees both local and foreign, and have open and proper grievance handling procedures in place.
- We are encouraged by the support from our public transport workers. We are grateful to the bus drivers who have agreed to help us maintain bus services for commuters, and the solidarity demonstrated by the public transport community, including private transport operators, who has rallied together to tide us through this period.

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