

# THE PLIGHT OF THE LABOURERS

They build our homes, clean up our streets and more, yet are often overlooked by Singaporeans. Meet the fervent Alex Au, a socio-political activist who tirelessly champions the rights of low-wage migrant workers in Singapore.



It's a typical hectic Friday evening at a nondescript curry house on Cuff road; the air is thick with the smell of spices cooking and anxiety brewing. Huddled around several tables in this soup kitchen are groups of distressed looking Indian migrant workers deep in discussion with volunteers from Transient Workers Count 2 (TWC2), a non-governmental organisation fighting for their welfare. Some claim they haven't been paid in months, whilst others nurse unwieldy injuries.

Amidst all this activity, a sprightly middle-aged looking gentleman beckons to me to take a seat. He is Alex Au, 59, treasurer and ex-co member of TWC2. In between conversations with workers, gesturing animatedly to his fellow volunteers and filming the whole scene (read: typical hectic Friday), he fills me in on how he got involved with the cause.

## SEEKING JUSTICE

In 2008, a large group of migrant workers from China sought redress through his website, [yawningbread.org](http://yawningbread.org). Working on building Marina Bay Sands, they had only been paid partial salaries for about eight months. Unable to tolerate the situation any longer, they gathered to protest to their employer, but were instead forcefully captured by repatriation agents and sent back to China. Such brute tactics are actually crimes known as wrongful confinement under Singapore's Penal Code.

Rhetorises Alex, "I believe that every human being is an equal member of the human race on this planet. Some of us aren't born into wealthy families with all the opportunities in life; it doesn't mean we must make everybody absolutely equal but the starting basis is that there must be equal respect for one another. There must be equal justice."



Whilst that particular group of migrant workers eventually managed to get remuneration due to Alex's initial publicity of the unfair practices, he sees his work as far from complete. "Every day, we (at TWC2) see five to ten new cases of exploitation. Multiply that by 365 days and that's over 2000 cases per year for a small organisation like us. Each worker usually represents a larger group who are afraid of complaining."

### **PUSHING FOR BLACK AND WHITE**

Indeed, I soon witnessed a common case of grievance, upon speaking to Adnan (name changed to protect privacy), a 22-year-old metal worker from Bangladesh. Allegedly unpaid for nine months under his previous employer, the pint-sized man says he made several complaints, only to be captured, beaten with a steel chain and sent back to Bangladesh. After borrowing \$3500, he managed to pay his agent's fees and get back to Singapore to work for a different employer, who apparently still hasn't paid him for a month's work. His previous employer was not prosecuted.

Such cases are prevalent, and both domestic and male migrant workers are vulnerable to other problems such as unsanitary living conditions, inadequate medical assistance and abuse, amongst others.

Through research, advocacy, public outreach and the daily soup kitchen for workers, Alex and his team of tenacious volunteers work towards ceasing such exploitation. Explains Alex, "The lack of documentation and contracts makes it easy for errant employers to get away with such unethical practices."

Although there are good employers that provide pay slips and contracts, Alex wishes to see this practice being mandated. He also hopes for a transfer system, as opposed to immediate repatriation of workers by employers. "Workers who are here longer will be more conscious of Singaporean culture and thus be able to fit better in our society, with less social friction," he theorises.

### **WHY EXPLOITATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS HAPPEN**

"The lack of documentation and contracts makes it easy for errant employers to get away with such unethical practices."







## THE VALUE OF MIGRANT WORKERS

"Singaporeans should not see low-wage migrant workers as the enemy. They are here to do the jobs that Singaporeans don't want to do. Without them, our roads are not going to be cleaned, rubbish won't be collected, no housing will be built and our homes won't be kept spic and span."

## AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Imagine, like in Adnan's situation, performing manual labour in a foreign land where you are unfamiliar with the language, culture and social nuances.

Well, this is exactly what low-wage migrant workers experience, and with recent hostilities over the influx of foreigners in Singapore, Alex emphasizes the need to distinguish low wage workers from others. Eyes blazing, he states, "I am very concerned about the rising political attitude towards migrant workers. It is completely without justification." – pull out quote (credit: Alex Au, 59, treasurer and ex-co member of TWC2)

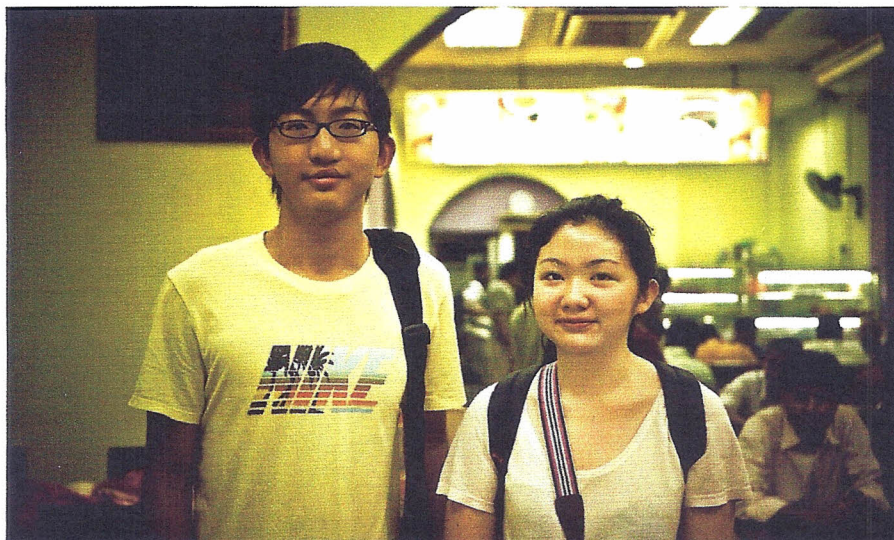
He shrewdly points out, "Singaporeans should not see low-wage migrant workers as the enemy. They are here to do the jobs that Singaporeans don't want to do, albeit being critical jobs. Without them, our roads are not going to be cleaned, rubbish won't be collected, no housing will be built and our homes won't be kept spic and span."

Eloquently describing migrant workers as being as critical to Singapore as our blood supply, Alex acknowledges the language barriers and cultural differences. However, he shuns the notion that their work is totally separate from ours.

## ENCOURAGING CHANGES

With that much being said, it is certainly heartening to witness Singaporean youth who are well-aware and far from apathetic to the plight of migrant workers.





Student Vanessa Heng, 19, who was at the Cuff Road soup kitchen for a polytechnic project, expressed views. "The media only portrays one side of everything; there was an online article about migrant workers staring at girls on the beach, but nobody really cares about them as human beings and i feel this is very unfair. Nobody wants to do their jobs, yet we blame them for crowding the country."

Reiterates her fellow student, Rayner Lee, 19, "Foreign workers are often ostracized in Singapore; people feel they should only be on lorries instead of buses and i feel that they are just here to do the labour. People our age take our lives for granted, not seeing the hard lives the migrant workers here experience, unable to see their families. We need to raise more awareness on this."

Policy-wise, Alex is also encouraged by the fact that lorries now have to be retrofitted with canopies and railings to protect the safety of workers.

## MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

With our rapidly expanding economy, there are thousands of migrant workers in Singapore, and their problems aren't likely to be solved within a day. However, it is encouraging to see organisations such as TWC2, as well as the NTUC Migrant Workers Forum working towards safeguarding migrant workers' interests. The Ministry of Manpower has also been actively engaging non-governmental organisations.

As for TWC2's plans, Alex answers candidly, "It is hard to plan and create projects long-term, due to funding limitations. However, we wish to create a system for Chinese workers to have a similar contact point, as they more or less suffer from the same kind of problems as the Bangladeshis here. For that, we will need more volunteers who are proficient in Chinese, who will be trained by TWC2."

Having learnt their struggles, I personally felt deeply moved by TWC2's undeniably noble cause, and glad for the relentless efforts of people like Alex. Before leaving, I asked Adnan about his family situation in Bangladesh, and he replied that he was the sole supporter of aged parents, who were currently in debt due to his second round of agent fees and unpaid salary.

The introspective young man looks at me with tired but clear eyes and shares, "No salary, parents, no makan (food). Here in Singapore people live longer; in Bangladesh, life is hard and short." Not one to wallow in self-pity, he shrugs, with twinkling eyes, "Singapore is a nice place to work, and Singaporeans are very nice people. I hope my new employer will pay me soon." Now, if only we could get more tolerance, empathy and concern from Singaporeans for people like Adnan, who are indisputably part of our society. ★

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## HELP US TO HELP THEM

If you are interested in making a donation or volunteering at TWC2, please visit [www.twc2.org.sg](http://www.twc2.org.sg).