



TRANSIENT WORKERS COUNT TOO

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FACT SHEET 2

UPR 2021
State under review:
Singapore

THEME : MIGRANT WORKERS : Job mobility

Low-wage migrant workers (“work permit holders”) are not allowed to switch to another employer unless the current employer has released the worker. Release can take the form of giving consent for a transfer or not renewing the work permit*. Consent is rare and non-renewal only provides a worker a short 20 days to look for a new job.

*The chance to look for another job upon non-renewal only applies to migrant workers in construction, shipyard and related industries. Work permit holders in other sectors, e.g. sanitation, manufacturing, domestic work etc, do not have this option.

Roots of the problem

Singapore policy is driven by a fear of large numbers of unemployed foreigners in the country, and a preference for placing social control of migrant workers in the hands of employers.

Thus, the current employer can cancel a work permit at any time without cause, and unless consent for transfer is given, the worker must be repatriated. A worker can resign at any time, but doing so leads to repatriation, with no right of transfer.

This policy puts excessive control in the hands of employers, severely limiting workers’ options and makes them vulnerable to exploitative demands, e.g. wage

cuts, unsafe work, long hours, as workers fear losing their jobs and being repatriated should they resist.

A better balance can and should be struck.

National framework

The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act explicitly mandates that employers must repatriate workers upon expiry or cancellation of the work permit (including resignation).

Permission for transfer is in fact an administrative exception to the legal requirement, which explains its discretionary and arbitrary characteristic.

Recommendation from prior cycles

In the second cycle (2016) Germany recommended “Improv[ing] the situation of work migrants by enabling them to easily switch employers” and this recommendation was noted by Singapore.

Suggested recommendation

1. Amend legislation to permit work permit holders 90 days of continued residency after the expiry or cancellation of work permits, including resignation, to enable them to look for other employment.