

Fair treatment, income support for low-wage workers critical, say experts

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Fair treatment, income support and union representation for low-wage workers, as well as retaining and training workers despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, will position Singapore to deal successfully with future challenges post-circuit breaker, said analysts.

At an online forum organised by

the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) yesterday and on the topic of “Employment risks in the age of pandemics”, Dr Ong Qiyang, a deputy director at the Social Service Research Centre of the National University of Singapore, said low-wage and gig-economy workers are especially vulnerable due to the lack of social protections offered by sick leave and annual leave.

She suggested three ways to improve their employment resilience:

strengthen fair treatment of them through government-paid sick leave and make fair treatment one of the assessment criteria for awarding government contracts; provide unemployment insurance or guaranteed basic income at least for the duration of the pandemic; and get unions to take on a larger role by enforcing the Employment Act and bargaining for more work flexibility and higher wages.

The panel discussion, moderated

by IPS head of governance and economy Christopher Gee, also featured National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) assistant secretary-general Desmond Choo, Institute and Faculty of Actuaries president John Taylor and Mr Lim Yew Heng, who is regional head of public affairs at Grab.

Mr Choo said NTUC has seen more workers signing up since the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak, indicating they want better representation and a collective voice. While the unions can look into legislative changes to improve employment conditions, the immediate concern must be to protect lives and livelihoods, he said.

The Government has intervened significantly with broad-based sup-

port such as the Jobs Support Scheme which subsidises the wages of local workers, and the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme, he said.

“These are needed to stabilise families until we can tide over the worst of the storm. They are financed through our reserves – we never had to borrow to run these programmes.”

Mr Choo added that it is not wise to turn to short-term fixes, such as drawing down one’s Central Provident Fund savings. “We do not want people to mortgage away their future – the Government will instead provide support grants and incentivise companies to train workers.”

Grab’s Mr Lim said that better rep-

resentation of gig-economy workers makes business sense.

“Some of our best partners – those with five-star ratings and high fulfilment rates – are very loyal and long-term partners. It is critical that we understand their needs and challenges,” he said.

NTUC’s Mr Choo said that companies should retain their workers as far as possible, as the erosion of human capital is the biggest impediment to a strong rebound.

“The easiest thing to do is to let go of people now. But if companies can train our workers and retain them, they help the economy get into a better rebound once we exit Covid-19.”

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