

## Move beyond dollars and cents for our guest workers

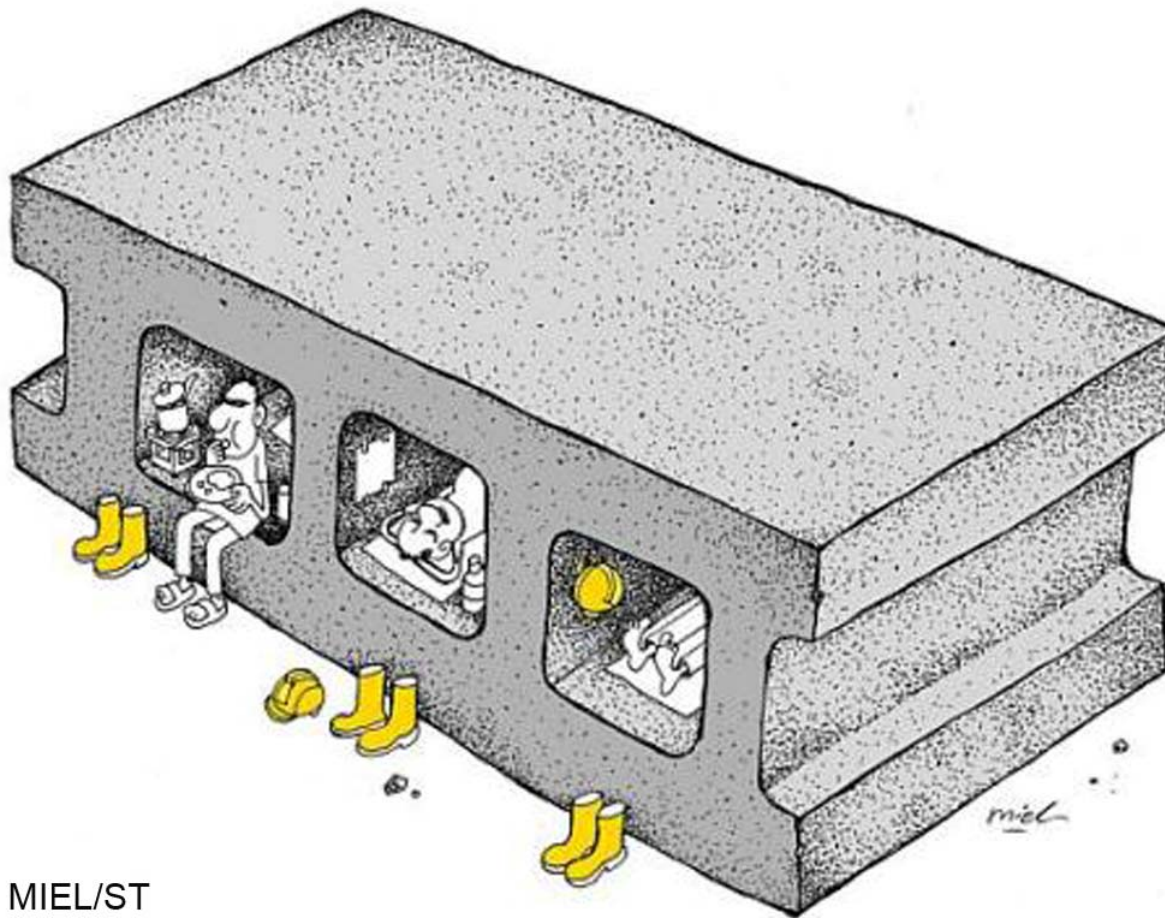


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 The Straits Times

New dorms for foreign workers are coming up, but employers shun them, preferring to put workers in cheap, makeshift shelters. That is unconscionable and it is time Singaporeans showed more heart to foreign workers.

Next week, the largest dormitory specially built for foreign workers here will open its doors in Tuas South Avenue 1.

Expected to house up to 16,800 workers, the dorm will have foodcourts, a goldsmith shop and a beer garden. There will also be a cricket field, a football field, a basketball court and a cinema.

It will be the first of nine dorms to be built in the next two years, adding close to 100,000 additional beds for foreign workers here. This is on top of the current existing 200,000 beds.

The move to provide decent, low-cost housing is a response to criticisms of the Government's foreign worker policy here, which has left foreign workers languishing in makeshift quarters.

Problems over foreign worker housing have been the public face of many of the issues over foreign workers here.

The Chinese bus drivers at SMRT who went on strike in November 2012 cited unhappiness over living conditions, including bedbugs in their beds.

And when the riots in Little India broke out, there was a lot of attention paid to the welfare of foreign workers, particularly, how and where they were housed.

Ms Debbie Fordyce, executive committee member of workers' rights group Transient Workers Count Too, said non-governmental organisations have long called for more facilities for foreign workers, and she is glad that more dorms will be opening soon.

However, she is sceptical that bosses used to putting up workers in cheap and poor housing will be drawn to the new purpose-built dorms.

### **Makeshift dorms**

She may be right.

Employers are shunning the purpose-built dorms. Let's do the maths.

There are about 770,000 work permit holders in Singapore, excluding domestic maids who live with employers.

About half of the 770,000 do not need dorm quarters to live in. These include Malaysians who commute here daily, and those in the manufacturing and service sectors who are allowed to rent Housing Board flats and live in private estates.

The remaining 385,000 workers are in sectors such as construction and marine who need dorms to live in.

There are dorm beds for just 200,000 currently, with another 100,000 expected to be ready the next two years, giving a total of 300,000.

With 385,000 potential residents, one would expect these dormitories to be filled as fast as they are completed.

But the reverse has happened.

In the past six months, dorms are hollowing out.

Employers move workers out of these purpose-built dorms into construction site quarters and factories that have been converted to makeshift shelters. Checks with dormitory operators show that there are at least 5,000 empty beds currently.

One reason for the move is cost.

Firms pay around \$300 every month to house a worker in a large dorm. It costs a lot less to house workers on factory-converted premises - about \$200 a month.

Employers who house workers in temporary shelters at construction sites save even more: They need to pay for only utilities.

They also save on transport costs for the workers who are housed on site.

Purpose-built dorms, in contrast, are located in far-flung areas such as Tuas and Mandai.

"As we run the dorms on construction sites ourselves, cost is reduced and we can better manage the movement of our workers. We also assign staff to be responsible for the maintenance of the dorms to keep them clean," said Mr Derick Pay, director of Tiong Seng Contractors.

#### **Dorms v makeshift shelters**

While some employers prefer makeshift shelters for workers, migrant worker activists say purpose-built dorms are better options for foreign workers.

All foreign worker housing must meet basic legal requirements in land use, structural integrity, fire safety, and hygiene and sanitation.

But at the several hundred makeshift dorms islandwide, standards are often not met or enforced.

Overcrowding is common, where bosses cram in more workers than the stipulated maximum.

There are too many makeshift shelters for government officials to conduct checks.

In contrast, there are only 40 purpose-built dorms now, and each is checked a few times a week by staff of government agencies. This keeps dorm operators on their toes.

Purpose-built dorms are also commercially run, which means dorm operators are motivated to secure the business of employers by keeping the place clean and offering workers good recreational facilities and even free Wi-Fi.

In contrast, makeshift dorms are operated by construction bosses for their workers.

The main goal is to keep cost low. Space constraints also make it hard to provide recreational facilities.

Since purpose-built dorms are clearly a better option for housing foreign workers, the Government can use regulation to persuade bosses to put workers up there.

Permits are needed for makeshift dorms to be set up at converted factories or at construction sites.

The Government can phase out permits for new quarters on construction sites and factory-converted dorms.

Permits for on-site quarters last for the length of the construction projects, while most factory-converted dorms operate on a three-year renewable basis.

Permits for this type of housing can be allowed to run until their expiry dates and not be renewed.

Some may consider this too extreme and akin to forcing all employers to move their workers into dorms.

A gentler approach is to continue to allow makeshift dorms to exist, but to set limits on the numbers allowed to live there.

The Manpower Ministry will also have to have stringent standards and enforce them regularly to prevent overcrowding.

#### **Mindset shift**

Building dorms is easy. Even using regulations to nudge employers into filling them is doable.

The most challenging problem, however, remains people's attitude towards foreign workers. At the heart of the issue is the simple fact that many bosses simply do not look out for their foreign workers' interests.

They keep costs as low as possible to maximise profits. That's why they choose cheap, low-quality housing, say migrant worker activists.

Ms Fordyce said: "It is all about cutting cost for employers. If they can pay a worker less and house them at a cheaper place, why not?"

Sadly, foreign workers themselves are accustomed to poor conditions.

When The Straits Times visited a few dorms on construction sites last week, workers were seen using filthy toilets with broken urinals and flooded toilet bowls. They showered outdoors using water meant for washing off cleaning equipment.

One Indian worker who lives on a Housing Board development project in Punggol expressed his sense of helplessness: "I'm happy or not happy, I still have to work. What company give, I take, if not, boss send me home."

Nor is it just employers who are guilty of this. A cold and transactional approach towards low-wage foreign workers extends to segments of Singapore society as well.

Locals understand that these workers are needed for jobs they do not want to do. Yet, they blame foreign workers for overcrowding public areas such as trains and buses. Some Singaporeans have also protested when dormitories are built near their homes, citing concerns about safety and falling property prices. It is also common for online forums to be flooded with nasty comments about foreigners.

Such attitudes have to change.

Foreign workers are here to earn a decent living. If workers are paid and treated better, they will stay on in Singapore. They gain experience, become more productive and help the economy grow. Many workers also eventually return home. Some become successful. Do we want workers to remember Singapore as a place that helped them or treated them shabbily?

Building dorms to house foreign workers is a good move on the part of the Government.

But it's also time for Singaporeans - employers and consumers included - to move beyond the dollars and cents, and treat our guest workers with more heart.

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