The Politics of Obedience:
Bangladeshi Construction Workers and the Migrant Labour Regime in Singapore

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research. It contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Charanpal S. Bal
Abstract

Among advanced capitalist states, there is an increasing trend towards the use of low-wage temporary migrant workers with limited political rights. Singapore is a prime example. In this country, migrant workers’ ability to agitate for better working conditions is greatly compromised by the repression and co-option of the trade union movement; their inability to access political rights guaranteed by citizenship; their occupational immobility and deportability; as well as the amount of debt accrued from high recruitment fees. Despite these tight controls, the stability of the migrant labour regime has been called into question in recent years by sporadic public episodes of migrant labour unrest and nascent NGO advocacy on behalf of these workers. There is a need to trace the origins of these tensions and examine how they impact upon the existing regime.

Using the case of transient Bangladeshi migrant construction workers, I identify workplace struggles – the production politics – between these workers and their employers as the source of these tensions. I argue that the extent to which the migrant labour regime can be contested is contingent on the form and outcomes of these production politics. Within this context, the latter tend to take the form of a tense and precarious politics of obedience. It is the collapse of this obedience politics, rather than its continued coherence, which provides the political impetus for contestation through NGO advocacy. The prevalence of obedience-based politics among these workers thus cannot be explained by their powerlessness or the inhibitions of their migration projects alone but by the manner in which they are situated within the dynamics of control in the labour process. Similarly, the limitations of NGO advocacy cannot be solely attributed to state repression. It needs to be considered that these dynamics of control tend to depoliticise worker grievances and provide workers with opportunities for tactical accommodation.

This thesis contributes to the migrant labour politics literature by emphasising the salience of labour process dynamics in understanding challenges to the migrant labour regime. The outcomes of production politics carry significant implications for the nature and extent of civil society contention within an authoritarian political environment. Political impediments facing contract migrant workers, therefore, need to be examined for the precise way in which they engender resistance and conflict. While structural coercion and migration projects may constrain political agitation, they compel workers to accommodate or resist control in other ways.
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Perth, Western Australia, August 2013.
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<td>AWARE</td>
<td>Association of Women for Action and Research</td>
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<td>BAIRA</td>
<td>Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies</td>
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<td>BDT</td>
<td>Bangladeshi Taka</td>
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<td>BMET</td>
<td>Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td>COE</td>
<td>Change-Of-Employer</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFMA</td>
<td>Employment of Foreign Manpower Act</td>
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<td>FMMD</td>
<td>Foreign Manpower Management Division</td>
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<td>GFC</td>
<td>Global Financial Crisis 2008</td>
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<td>GONGO</td>
<td>Government Organised Nongovernmental Organisation</td>
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<td>HOME</td>
<td>Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics</td>
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<td>LPT</td>
<td>Labour Process Theory</td>
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<td>MD</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
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<td>MISAF</td>
<td>Migrant Sanctuary Foundation Bangladesh</td>
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<td>MoEWOE</td>
<td>Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment</td>
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<td>MOM</td>
<td>Ministry of Manpower Singapore</td>
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<td>MWC</td>
<td>Migrant Workers Centre</td>
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<td>MYE</td>
<td>Man-Year Entitlement</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Nongovernmental Organisation</td>
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<td>NTUC</td>
<td>National Trades Union Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>People’s Action Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>SCAL</td>
<td>Singapore Contractors Association Ltd</td>
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<tr>
<td>TJS</td>
<td>Temporary Job Scheme</td>
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<td>TWC2</td>
<td>Transient Workers Count Too</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNIFEM</td>
<td>United Nations Development Fund for Women</td>
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<td>UPR</td>
<td>Universal Periodic Review</td>
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<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>VWO</td>
<td>Voluntary Welfare Organisations</td>
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<td>WARBE</td>
<td>The Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants</td>
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Introduction

Context

Among the advanced capitalist countries, there is an increasing trend towards the use of short-term contract migrant labour with limited political rights (Bauder, 2006; Cohen, 2006; Young, 2006). Singapore is a prime example. In 2006, contract migrant workers constituted almost 30% of the country’s total workforce (Yeoh, 2007). Over 85% of these migrants were semi- or unskilled workers employed within key industries1 which are highly dependent on the use of migrant labour to maintain their growth and profitability (ibid). Migrant workers are hence integral to the way Singaporean society and its economy function – they build the country’s homes, roads and offices; they ensure that these places remain sanitary and functional; they produce commodities that are traded abroad. Yet they enter the country on one- or two-year contracts with little or no opportunity for subsequently settling down in Singapore. Based on this, the dynamics and transformations of Singapore’s migrant labour regime are integral to the shape of the country’s political economy.

Industrial relations in Singapore are often characterised as being under tight state control – the repression and co-option of trade union movements and the successful enforcement of pro-business labour laws being well known. This allows the People’s Action Party (PAP)-state to discipline labour in the interest of a particular model of economic growth and the preservation of one-party rule (Rodan, 1989; Vasil, 1989; Deyo, 1991; Hing, 1997). However, contract migrant workers are additionally subject to even stiffer and coercive regulations governing their employment. In particular, the work permit system severely restricts the occupational mobility of migrant workers and seeks to ensure they do not integrate within Singapore society. Above all, it ensures the deportability of migrant workers, where the right to terminate employment and repatriate migrant workers – even forcibly – is at the complete discretion of their employers. The vulnerability of contract migrant labour is further compounded by the fact that almost all migrant workers are in debt by the time they arrive in Singapore due to large recruitment fees commanded by labour-hire agents (TWC2, 2012). The ability

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1 Industries such as construction, shipbuilding, cleaning/conservancy, manufacturing and even services are highly dependent on the use of migrant workers.
of migrant workers to agitate for better working conditions is thus greatly compromised by these factors.

Yet, over the last five years, the stability of the repressive migrant labour regime as well as the tight hand of the state have been challenged by a number of sporadic public episodes of migrant worker unrest and nascent NGO advocacy on behalf of such workers. These acts of collective defiance, reported on locally and internationally around the time of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008/09, involved contract migrant workers of various nationalities rallying outside the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) building to demand unpaid wages as well as to protest their under-deployment and consequent threats of forced repatriation (Reuters, 27-02-2009; The Straits Times, 17-05-2009). Many of these workers had brought their work-related grievances to, and sought assistance from, locally-based migrant worker NGOs who lobbied on their behalf to MOM and called for labour reform (Reuters, 27-02-2009; The Online Citizen, 15-01-2009; The Straits Times, 17-05-2009). While Ministry officials initially sought the immediate repatriation of laid-off workers, concessions outside the provisions of existing labour legislation were soon made to appease these workers. Also, Ministry officials and PAP ministers have since attempted to change their public stance towards a few of the salient issues facing migrant workers such as occupational immobility, employer kickbacks for recruitment and the forceful repatriation of migrant workers (e.g. Ministry of Manpower, 01-07-2008, 21-11-2011; Channel NewsAsia, 22-07-2013), all issues that they had previously ignored. There then followed small-scale, but significant, amendments to the country’s migrant worker laws, such as the criminalisation of employer kickbacks and the institution of “no-work-pay” provisions as well as moves towards possible reform of the Change-Of-Employer (COE) framework (Ministry of Manpower, 2011, 13-08-2012, 11-09-2012; Channel NewsAsia, 22-07-2013).

Beyond the highly visible, but only occasional, acts of public defiance by migrant workers lies the site where these grievances arise – the workplace. In his account of Bangladeshi migrant workers in a building construction site in Singapore, Noorman Abdullah (2005) paints a picture of the worksite as riddled with tensions between migrant workers and employers where the former engage in forms of informal or “everyday resistances” of gossip, thefts and slow-downs. Migrant worker NGO reports and case-files document various instances of migrant workers defying the authority of
their employers to demand better working conditions and actively resisting their forced repatriation. These accounts point towards less public, but more regular, forms of conflict within the workplace. The challenge this thesis takes on is to show in what ways these do or do not transform into more organised and overt forms of struggle.

**Research problem**

In this thesis, I uncover the dynamics of struggles between migrant workers and their employers in the workplace and, in doing so, I address questions as to how these struggles come about and what consequences their outcomes hold for the migrant labour regime in Singapore. This is done by interrogating the nature, origins and implications of these informal migrant worker struggles in the workplace. Through a case-study of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore, I explain the sources, dynamics and consequences of these workplace struggles, or production politics (Burawoy, 1985; Hart, 1991), by posing the following questions:

(i) How do these struggles come about and assume their particular form?

(ii) What is the impact of these struggles upon the existing migrant labour regime?

The tensions within the migrant labour regime outlined earlier indicate potential challenges for the strategies and techniques required to ensure its stability. A closer examination of the origins, nature and implications of these tensions is, therefore, very timely. The precise manner in which workplace struggles come about, as well as the implications they hold for how the regime operates has not been analysed previously. But as this thesis shows, the charting of these struggles is significant because it reveals tensions within the migrant labour regime in Singapore, which in turn, sheds light on the dynamics through which this regime operates as well as the extent to which contestation can take place. What is it about Singapore’s system of using migrant labour and the backgrounds of migrant workers themselves which lead to such tensions? What are these struggles over? There is a need to understand the extent to which these workplace struggles create an impetus for more organised struggles involving NGO

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2 One particular NGO, the Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), records between 40 and over 100 new work-related complaints a month from migrant workers employed in the construction, shipbuilding, cleaning/conservancy and service sectors. Another NGO, Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), have documented a number of their recent cases on their website (www.twc2.org.sg). Various anecdotes of migrant worker resistance in the workplace can be found here: http://twc2.org.sg/category/articles/stories/
advocacy and activism. To what extent do informal migrant worker struggles in the workplace provide the impetus for NGOs to lobby the Singapore authorities to reform the latter’s migrant worker laws? What was it that made the Manpower Ministry change its position on particular migrant worker issues?

While questions about the form and implications of production politics have been well-addressed in various ways within historical and ethnographic accounts of labour and peasant politics (e.g. Thompson, 1966; Sewell, 1980; Burawoy, 1985; Scott, 1985, 1990; Ong, 1987; Metcalfe, 1988; Hart, 1991; Ibrahim, 1998; Koo, 2001), they are treated in only a limited way within the migrant labour literature. The bulk of scholars tend to be concerned with the causes and effects of migration itself (see: Massey et. al., 1993). Scholars have tended to focus on what factors cause workers to migrate and what kinds of benefits or losses migration brings to sending and receiving communities.

Political economy scholarship on migrant labour politics, on the other hand, offer a vital contribution in addressing these questions by highlighting the political powerlessness of migrant workers as a defining characteristic of migrant labour regimes (Castles and Kosack, 1973; Castells, 1975; Burawoy, 1976; Zolberg, 1979; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Hewison and Young, 2006; Munck, 2008; Binford, 2009). Political powerlessness involves the absence of legal-political rights for migrant workers, otherwise accessible through citizenship, obstacles migrant workers face in accessing trade union movements in host countries, and the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers. But within this literature, powerlessness is often understood as an impediment – rather than a constituent – to the political struggles of migrant workers.

Otherwise, an increasing number of works have emphasised the role of migrant worker agency in shaping labour regimes in Asia and beyond (Cohen, 1987, 1991, 2006; Mitchell, 1996; Ball and Piper, 2006; Constable, 2007, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007; Munck, 2008; Hsia, 2009; Leung and Pun, 2009; Lyons, 2009; Taylor, 2009). In examining the development of and barriers to migrant-labour self-organisation and NGO advocacy on behalf of migrant workers, the scholarship has been largely focused on overt, organised and collective aspects of migrant labour struggles. Here, political powerlessness is again a crucial factor in that it hinders collective mobilisation (Binford, 2009). At the same time, scholars such as Constable (2007, 2009), Ford and Piper
(2007) and Hsia (2009) demonstrate that in certain contexts transnational migrant workers – most notably migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong – are still able to mobilise – either through self-organisation or in alliance with faith-based and NGO groups – despite the political impediments. The relative quiescence of migrant labour activism in Singapore, in contrast to Hong Kong, is often explained in terms of the authoritarian nature of the Singapore state (Piper, 2006; Lyons, 2005, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007). This, however, does not account for the recent emergence of migrant labour unrest and NGO advocacy in Singapore nor does it sufficiently explain the small steps towards reform taken by the state. More importantly, by focusing largely on the means of contention, these authors do not address the underlying social conflicts which give rise to contention.

With the exception of Constable’s (2007) ethnography, none of the above works go into great depth about how these struggles come about. As a result, the workplace – the site where the grievances of migrant workers arise – and its attendant conflicts are often not analysed with the same rigour as demonstrations, protests and NGO advocacy. The observations made earlier on Singapore, together with Abdullah’s (2005) account and the NGO case-files, indicate that tensions in the regime – in the form of worker grievances – originate in the workplace. These tensions need to be interrogated in order to reveal how they come about and how they impact upon the migrant labour regime. This has not been sufficiently addressed by the literature so far.

While a few studies draw out the dynamics of workplace struggles (Sargeson, 1999; Pinches, 2001; de Genova, 2005, 2006; Bauder, 2006; Constable, 2007; Buckley, 2013), only Sargeson’s (1999) account of rural-to-urban migrants in China provides a systematic analysis of the workplace migrant workers occupy to illustrate the sources, dynamics and consequences of these struggles. In attempting to draw causal links between China’s transition to market capitalism and the economic situation, culture and politics of the emerging rural-to-urban migrant working class, Sargeson devotes significant attention to worker struggles in the workplace. What also sets her account apart from the rest is that it conceptualises the workplace as a labour process in capitalist society where the organisation of production shapes the experiences of workers and influences the form conflict takes. Aspects of political powerlessness
evident in China’s *hukou* system\(^3\) - the segmented nature of recruitment; patronage networks and controls exercised by local government officials – structured how management controlled workers as well as how workers resisted managerial control. The powerlessness of migrant workers, even when it proves to be harsher for transnational migrants, is not only significant as an impediment to worker resistance, but also in the manner in which it engenders particular forms of struggle.

*Approach*

To account for the form and impact of these workplace struggles, I combine a political economy analysis of Singapore’s migrant labour regime with an in-depth analysis of the production politics of Bangladeshi construction workers. A migrant labour regime is defined as a set of legal-political structures constructed by the state which attempts to regulate the contradictions of capital by rendering migrant workers politically powerless. This is done by denying these workers citizenship rights, ensuring their deportability and occupational immobility and constructing impediments to their political mobilisation.


The research questions of the thesis will be addressed by establishing causal links between Singapore’s migrant labour regime and the production politics of Bangladeshi

\(^3\) *hukou* – a form of registered residence system first enforced in 1958 and still in place today which effectively restricts the geographical mobility of rural-to-urban migrant workers. See Chan and Buckingham (2008) on contemporary measures to reform this system and subsequent implications.
construction workers. Firstly, I examine how the political economy of Singapore’s migrant labour regime shapes the form of production politics in the construction site. This involves investigating how migrant labour laws and policies – as well as the manner in which they have been enforced – shapes the kind of control strategies used by construction contractors in the workplace. This also involves demonstrating how the particular form of migrant labour powerlessness constructed by the regime shapes the way in which migrant workers may challenge these control strategies.

At the same time, there is a need to consider the immediate interests of Bangladeshi migrants when they enter the labour process as another factor that shapes the form of production politics. What do these temporary labour emigrants seek and how do they try to attain it? What kinds of compulsions or vulnerabilities do they bring with them into the labour process? Using Ortner’s (2003) reading of Sartre (1963) as a starting point, the objectives and circumstances of temporary labour emigration are conceptualised as a “migration project” which shapes the way these workers respond to control strategies in the labour process. Then, in order to explain the prevalent form of production politics between these workers and their employers, I show how powerlessness and migration projects intersect with and within the dynamics of control at construction sites. These dynamics of control, which include the technical organisation of production and specific contractor control and supervision strategies, intersect with these factors to produce both impediments and opportunities for workers to act upon their grievances. The end result is a form of struggle that I call “the politics of obedience” – the tactical use of obedience by workers to accommodate contractor control whilst informally renegotiating the effort-reward bargain.

Secondly, I investigate how such production politics impact upon the migrant labour regime. This necessarily involves paying attention to the variable and contingent outcomes of workers’ obedience-based politics. By focusing on the inherent tensions within the politics of obedience, I explain the different ways in which these tensions play out as well as the political implications of these outcomes. Two particular outcomes – the continuation of tactical accommodation through obedience-based politics and the collapse of this politics evidenced through worker flight – are highlighted and elaborated upon to reveal their practical logic and significance for regime contestation. I then go on to examine the most concerted challenge to the migrant labour regime in recent years – NGO advocacy and activism. The substantive
form of migrant labour advocacy is situated within Jayasuria and Rodan (2007) and Rodan’s (2013) mode of political participation framework in order to understand the “underlying social foundations” and impact of activism. This allows for an examination of the extent to which outcomes of production politics enhance or restrict the capacity for these NGOs to advocate for reform to migrant labour laws.

The central argument of the thesis is that the extent to which the migrant labour regime can be contested is contingent on the outcomes of this politics of obedience. Contentious outcomes of production politics – reflected in worker flight – rather than the reproduction of the politics of obedience, provide the primary political impetus for NGOs to launch challenges to the migrant labour regime. The prevalence of obedience-based politics among Bangladeshi migrant workers cannot be explained solely in terms of their political powerlessness or the constraints of their migration projects, but in the particular manner in which these are situated within the dynamics of control in the labour process. Similarly, the limitations of advocacy cannot be attributed to state repression alone. It needs to be considered that these dynamics of control serve to reinforce and restore the politics of obedience in spite of its inherent tensions.

Navigation guide

In Chapter One, the existing literature on migrant labour politics is discussed in relation to the research questions and a conceptual approach – based on examining causal links between the migrant labour regime and production politics – is distilled from this discussion. The rest of the thesis is divided into two parts – the first explores the factors that account for the prevalent form of production politics among Bangladeshi construction workers; while the second explores links between the outcomes of production politics and challenges to Singapore’s migrant labour regime. Chapter Two tackles the political economy of Singapore’s migrant labour regime. I focus on tensions between state objectives and the interests of construction contractors over two aspects of migrant labour policy – the levy system and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA). I demonstrate how government policies to push contractors to adopt more capital-intensive production methods ended up creating a tendency among contractors to protect profitability in production through the use of wage-pressure strategies on politically powerless migrant workers. In Chapter Three, I evaluate what is at stake for Bangladeshi workers as they enter the wage-labour nexus in Singapore. I do this by
examining the material and ideological circumstances under which they undertake temporary labour migration – or their migration projects. Chapter Four analyses the form of production politics between these workers and their employers and explains why it takes this particular form. By showing how political powerlessness and migration projects intersect with and within the dynamics of control, I explain how and why the politics of obedience comes about.

In Chapters Five and Six, I focus on the variable and contingent outcomes of workplace struggles by examining how the politics of obedience plays out within different workplace circumstances in the face of enduring worker grievances over employer wage-pressures. Chapter Five examines how a crisis of obedience comes about, how obedience is restored and the political implications of its restoration. Using a case-study of a single construction firm, I illustrate how the introduction of new wage-pressures disrupts existing forms of worker accommodation such as work-pacing. I highlight the significance of supervisory, rather than managerial, strategies used in the restoration of obedience and the depoliticisation of worker grievances. Chapter Six is concerned with the circumstances under which the politics of obedience unravels. Here, I explain how tactical accommodation transforms into contentious struggles in the workplace. By focusing on a common form of overt resistance among Bangladeshi workers – flight – which involves workers deserting the workplace to seek outside assistance, I explain why their resistance takes this form and the political significance of this. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I connect these outcomes of production politics to recent NGO calls for migrant labour regime reform. By examining the way in which these NGOs carve out spaces of advocacy within an illiberal political regime, I argue that outcomes of flight, rather than the perpetuation of obedience politics, provide the political impetus for small-scale reforms to the country’s migrant labour laws.

Overall, two significant points on the study of migrant labour politics are stressed in this thesis. Firstly, the various political impediments facing migrant labour need to be examined for the precise way in which they engender resistance and conflict. While political powerlessness and migration projects may preclude certain worker responses and constrain them in many ways, they may also compel workers to accommodate or resist control in other ways. Secondly, the findings of this thesis emphasise the analysis of labour process dynamics as key to understanding challenges to migrant labour
regimes. The outcomes of production politics have significant ramifications for the way labour regimes operate and the extent to which they can be challenged.
Chapter One

Production Politics and Migrant Labour Regimes

In this chapter, I outline my approach to answering the research questions posed in the introduction – how do the workplace struggles of Bangladeshi migrant workers and their employers come about and assume a given form; and what is the impact of these struggles upon the existing migrant labour regime? Mainstream debates in labour migration – largely neo-classical and dependency approaches – do not address these research questions. It is the literature on migrant labour politics which provides analytical insights to address them.

The literature on migrant labour politics can be broadly divided into three important streams – the political economy; the contentious politics and the “everyday resistances” streams. I argue that while none of these adequately answer the research questions, they offer conceptual tools with which a suitable approach can be formulated. By drawing on conceptual contributions made by the migrant labour politics literature as well as theoretical insights offered by Labour Process Theory, I conceptualise workplace struggles as “production politics” within a capitalist labour process where employers attempt to set their migrant workers to work through a range of control strategies. My approach essentially involves investigating causal links between these production politics and Singapore’s migrant labour regime – how do migrant labour regimes shape the form of production politics and to what extent do the various outcomes of production politics challenge the existing migrant labour regime? This is executed by combining an analysis of the production politics of Bangladeshi migrant construction workers in Singapore (to account for its form and outcomes) with a political economy analysis of the migrant labour regime. After expounding my approach, I go on to reflect on the data used as well as the sources and methods of collecting the data.

Mainstream Debates: Causes and Effects of Migration

The early debates on labour migration focus largely on the causes of migration and the effects it has on sending communities. As a result, they afford little attention to the politics of production and specifically how workers live out their migration objectives and the impacts of these on the migrant labour regime. The mainstream works tend to
centre on, but are not exclusive to, two different theoretical approaches – neoclassical and dependency theories.

In accounting for the causes of migration, neoclassical explanations have tended to centre on issues determining the supply and demand for labour (Lewis, 1954; Ranis and Fei, 1961; Athukorala and Manning, 1999) and “rational choices” of individuals and groups in maximising income and diversifying income risks (Taylor, 1986; Stark, 1991; Fischer et. al., 1997). Sociological studies have intersected with these neoclassical debates by arguing that social networks (Massey et. al., 1993; Dannecker, 2009) and patterns of capital and human flows between countries (Fawcett, 1989; Zlotnik, 1992) also play significant roles in determining observed patterns of migration. Dependency approaches, on the other hand, argue that migration comes about due to global inequalities and structural dependency between nation-states as economically displaced populations are eventually drawn towards capital in developed economies (Portes, 1978; Piore, 1979; Wiest, 1979; Petras, 1981; Reichert, 1981). While neoclassical works tend to emphasise the economic benefits of remittances in stimulating long-term development in sending communities (Stahl, 1989; Appleyard, 1992; Hermele, 1997; de Haas, 2005; Rahman, 2009; World Bank, 2011), dependency approaches argue that labour emigration hinders the economic development of sending nations (Portes, 1978; Piore, 1979; Reichert, 1981).

Through Massey et. al.’s (1993: 463) overview, it is apparent that these debates are over the “causal mechanisms” of labour migration and its effects. The reason for focusing on causes and effects was, to some extent, to inform government policies in regulating international migration. Little attention was therefore paid to the nature and context of these government regulations or how the “causes” of migration produced particular outcomes for migrant workers within the workplace.

Furthermore, for many neoclassical scholars, a “migrant labour system” was a trend or pattern of migration “flows” from one particular country to another (e.g. Zlotnik, 1992; Massey et. al., 1993: 454, 462) rather than a political structure. These studies do not interrogate the political interests involved in the regulation of labour flows by governments (Burawoy, 1976: 1051). Furthermore, while some of these studies do acknowledge that migrant workers are disadvantaged within such “systems”, they rarely explicitly address the nature of migrant worker marginality or vulnerability. It was the
political economy literature on labour migration, which, from the 1970s, sought to address this question.

**Powerlessness and Migrant Labour Regimes**

Political economy studies within the labour migration literature provide the basis for defining a migrant labour regime along the lines of workers’ political powerlessness (Castles and Kosack, 1973; Castells, 1975; Burawoy, 1976; Zoldberg, 1979; Sassen-Koob, 1981; R. Cohen, 1987, 1991, 2006; Sassen, 1988; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Hewison and Young, 2006; Munck, 2008; Binford, 2009). This approach generally distinguishes itself from mainstream approaches by focusing on how the use of migrant labour within particular countries altered or reshaped class dynamics within these societies by dividing the working class along citizenship and ethnic lines. Many of these studies had their starting point in the conception of the working class in capitalist society as a critical social force. Their problematique was, therefore, how the increasing use of migrant workers shaped the nature of class structure and class struggle in host societies (e.g. Castells, 1975: 32-33). However, this body of literature also proves useful in drawing out the general defining features of a migrant labour regime.

**Class contradictions and migrant labour regimes**

For Donna Turner (2005), a labour control regime is necessary because of “conflicting societal and economic demands” brought about by the class relations of exploitation between labour and capital necessary for capitalist accumulation in society. Class, in my study, is defined as a socio-historical relation of exploitation between appropriators and producers where surplus labour or, in capitalism, surplus value is extracted from direct producers (Wood, 1995: 76). At an abstract level, the relations of exploitation between labour and capital are structurally antithetical because:

> Exploitation is both central to the capitalist process, and contradictory within it, in that it is a relationship which both delivers surplus value and produces an inherent conflict of interest which undermined the production of surplus value. This is true both in the short term, in the sense that intermittent and endemic conflict around the effort-reward relationship continually interrupts the production process, and in the long term in the sense that a class employed to labour for less value than it produces has interests inherently opposed to those of the class which extracts the surplus… (S. Cohen, 1987: 41-42).
Informed by similar theoretical orientations, Turner (2005: 48) defines a general labour control regime as:

…a complex mixture of deliberate and opportunistic practices and institutions, embedded within cultural and historical specificities, through which the state attempts to stabilise conflicting societal and economic demands associated with labour’s contribution to, and participation in society. This is a macro-level concept that focuses on the means by which actions at the state level support or challenge the local level and workplace based means of labour control desired by capital.

From this definition, a general regime of labour control represents an intervention by the state to regulate the contradictions of exploitation through a combination of concessions, coercion and/or consensus which would “quell potentially destabilising societal demands” in order to deliver economic growth (Turner, 2005: 48-49). A migrant labour regime is taken to be a similar political structure operating within the larger regime of labour control. The difference between a migrant labour regime and other forms of regulating labour in society is that the former is a specific mode of labour control based on the construction of migrant worker “powerlessness” as a means to inhibit the political contestation of labour (Castles and Kosack, 1973; Castells, 1975: 33-34; Burawoy, 1976: 1051; Zoldberg, 1979; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Binford, 2009).

Powerlessness

The powerlessness of contract migrant workers comprises four interrelated aspects – the absence of significant legal-political rights for migrant workers; the occupational immobility of migrant workers; their deportability; and impediments to accessing traditional trade union movements. While such a definition of powerlessness applies largely to low-skilled transnational contract workers, they can also apply, to varying extents, to both migrant workers with some residency rights and to undocumented migrant workers. As such, studies on internal rural-to-urban migration in China under the hukou system (Sargeson, 1999; Pun, 2005; Leung and Pun, 2009), apartheid-era black migrant labour in Southern Africa (Burawoy, 1976; R. Cohen, 1987), long-term migration in Western Europe (Castles and Kosack, 1973; Castells, 1975; Sassen, 1988) and undocumented migrants in North America (de Genova, 2005, 2006; Bauder, 2006) are considered throughout this thesis. Like the use of contract migrant labour, these
forms reflect global trends towards flexible labour relations as well as the use of workers with limited political and legal entitlements (Standing, 1997; Cohen, 2006: 149; Deyo, 2012: 173-177; Kalleberg and Hewison, 2013). These studies, therefore, highlight various state mechanisms which enforce labour flexibility and limited legal-political entitlements.

The first aspect of powerlessness is that contract migrant workers are usually denied significant political, civil and legal rights which are otherwise accessible through citizenship (Burawoy, 1976; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Cohen, 2006: 149-153; Munck, 2008: 1244). By denying certain migrant workers access to citizenship, governments of receiving states are not politically answerable to them. Receiving states do not depend on migrant workers for political legitimacy as the latter do not constitute an electoral bloc (Cohen, 2006: 152). Migrant workers therefore may have little or no access to certain social services which governments or employers are legally obliged to provide citizens with (ibid: 149). Many labour rights that resident workers enjoy, such as the right to form unions, may not be accessible or applicable to migrants. Burawoy (1976: 1072) and Mitchell (1996) show that seasonal migrant farm labour in California has often been excluded from the existing labour laws of the United States. In countries such as Taiwan and Singapore, labour laws do not apply to live-in migrant domestic workers (Loveband, 2006; Lyons, 2009), while in Thailand, most migrant workers are excluded from coverage by labour laws (Hewison and Young, 2006: 3). Even in countries where basic labour standards exist to protect migrant workers, receiving states have often been lax or disinterested in upholding and enforcing these laws (Cohen, 2006; also see: HOME and TWC2, 2010 for the Singapore case).

Above all, migrant workers – particularly transnational contract workers – are usually legally denied any access to gaining citizenship or permanent residence in host countries which makes their integration into these societies impossible. Even in more liberal migrant labour regimes in West Germany and Switzerland where migrant workers enjoy long-term residency rights, immigration law had been tweaked in the 1970s to restrict the number of labour immigrants from accessing permanent residence (Sassen, 1988: 51). In more recent regimes in Asia and the Middle East where short-term or contract-based migrant labour is more prevalent, access to citizenship for semi- and unskilled migrant workers has always been completely closed-off. Stringent immigration laws in countries like Singapore mean that these workers are ineligible for
permanent residence, cannot bring their families with them and are legally prohibited from marrying citizens or even within the host society (Yeoh, 2007: 4; Liow, 2011: 14-15).

Secondly, the occupational mobility of migrant workers is almost always formally or informally restricted once they have been accepted into host states. This means that migrant workers are typically not free to search for jobs on the open market (Binford, 2009: 507). Even where labour migrants have some residency rights in West Germany and Switzerland, immigration laws were modified to prevent migrant workers from changing employers for at least five years (Sassen, 1988: 51). Short-term contract and seasonal migrant labour programmes in Asia and North America have been harsher in imposing restrictions on migrant workers’ occupational mobility. Semi- and unskilled migrant workers in Singapore and many Middle Eastern countries, for instance, are legally prohibited from working for anyone aside from their designated employer (Yeoh, 2007: 4, Human Rights Watch, 2006; White, 2008). Furthermore, racial discrimination within host societies, whether informal or formally instituted, also produces restrictions on workers’ occupational mobility (Castles and Kosak, 1973; Castells, 1975; Burawoy, 1976; Cohen, 2006).

Thirdly, and because they are stripped of significant legal and political rights, migrant workers are always liable to be deported (Yeoh, 2007: 3). “Deportability” as a concept is quite distinct from the actual practices of deportation – while the forced deportation of migrant workers, by government authorities and employers, usually serves to regulate labour supply within host economies, it is the deportable status of migrant workers that specifically renders their labour-power a “distinctly disposal commodity” (de Genova, 2005: 8; Liow, 2011: 14). This makes migrant workers particularly vulnerable in host societies as deportability allows government authorities and employers greater leeway in controlling the migrant workforce (Binford, 2009: 508, 513). Migrant workers are, thus, not just faced with insecure tenure but also constantly faced with the implicit threat of being physically removed from host societies.

Finally, migrant workers are generally cut off from existing trade union movements within host countries. In Western European countries, which traditionally have had relatively stronger labour movements, migrant workers tend to be politically isolated, racially discriminated against by unions and generally unfamiliar with union politics.
(Castells, 1975; Sassen-Koob, 1981). In these cases, employers are able to treat migrant workers “as though the labour movement did not exist” (Castells, 1975: 52).

More recent migrant labour regimes in Asia and the Middle East, however, operate within already repressive political environments for labour in general. The significant labour-importing countries such as Singapore and the Gulf states, for instance, are notable for the absence of strong independent labour unions within these states. In countries such as Thailand where relatively independent trade unions exist, migrant workers are systematically denied the right to form unions and to engage in collective bargaining (Arnold and Hewison, 2006: 169-172). While migrant workers in Singapore are not barred from joining trade unions, these unions are effectively controlled by the PAP state through various forms of legislation which suppresses independent union activity and incorporates the union movement to suit the party’s political agenda. Migrant workers’ attempts to organise themselves to pursue their interests are not only undermined by their lack of access to the benefits of citizenship and their status of deportability; but also by the existing repression and incorporation of labour movements within host societies.

In essence, the literature emphasises the role of host states in constructing the political powerlessness of migrant workers. This powerlessness can be understood in terms of migrants being stripped of civil and legal rights, their occupational immobility, their deportable status in host societies and their distance from traditional trade union politics. As a consequence, particular segments of capital are able to benefit from “cheap” and easily controllable workers who are unlikely to resist exploitation and abuse (Binford, 2009). Sassen-Koob (1981) argues that firms in competitive and backward sectors of the economy tend to derive additional benefits from the hiring of migrant workers – these firms are able to take advantage of the ease of hiring and firing migrant workers to institute flexible labour regimes within the firm and this reduces the pressure to change or innovate techniques of production or to improve working conditions (ibid: 72). Above all, this particular form of “powerlessness” ensures that migrant workers have few formal rights by which to influence the institutions that subordinate them (Burawoy, 1976: 1061; Binford, 2009: 509). This means that the spaces that migrant workers have to resist or contest the exploitation and abuse that they face are extremely limited or impeded by the aforementioned structural factors. This
does not make migrant worker resistance impossible, but it certainly calls it into question.

**Contentious Politics**\(^4\) and Political Mobilisation

While political economy works on labour migration tend to emphasise the inhibitions of migrant worker powerlessness, a growing scholarship on migrant labour politics has focused on real or potential challenges to migrant labour regimes (R. Cohen, 1987, 1991, 2006; Mitchell, 1996; Ball and Piper, 2006; Constable, 2007, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007; Munck, 2008; Hsia, 2009; Leung and Pun, 2009; Lyons, 2009; Taylor, 2009). These works pay a good deal of attention to the potential for and emergence of migrant worker struggles. The questions posed by these scholars can be summarised as: how can migrant workers be organised to resist political and economic domination given that migrant labour regimes represent extremely prohibitive impediments to this; and, to what extent can such organising bring about changes to migrant labour regimes? These studies focus largely on overt, collective and organised aspects of migrant worker struggles and focus on the possibilities, accomplishments and barriers to the organisation and collective mobilisation of these workers. These studies examine two forms of overt and collective resistance – migrant worker self-organisation and advocacy and activism in tandem with, or on behalf of, migrant workers.

*Migrant worker self-organisation and mobilisation*

In the mid-1980s, Robin Cohen (1987: 200) described the struggle for representation and legal organisation among black migrant mine workers in South Africa – effectively stripped of all political rights outside traditional “homelands” through apartheid laws and the “pass system” – as having reached an “advanced stage” despite certain political and ideological limitations. The unionisation of black miners prevented mine owners from ignoring wage demands or contemplating mass expulsions “without the threat of massive strike actions” (1987: 219). More recently, Leung and Pun (2009) provide a detailed account of how rural-to-urban migrant workers in the gemstone industry in

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\(^4\) The term “contentious politics” here is borrowed from Tarrow (1994: 2-3) to refer to acts by “ordinary people” in openly and collectively confronting elites, authorities and political opponents to push for political change. However, not all the authors listed in this section utilise Tarrow’s framework of analysis. These scholars analyse contentious politics concerning migrant workers from backgrounds as diverse as political geography (Mitchell, 1996), “new” International Labour Studies (Leung and Pun, 2009; Munck, 2008; Taylor, 2009) and gender and migration anthropology (Constable, 2007).
Southern China (subject to relatively similar forms of structural “powerlessness”) have organised themselves to pressure government agencies in Beijing and, through strikes and protests, forced the government to act on their hazardous working conditions.

However, such overt forms of migrant worker self-organisation and mobilisation, especially among transnational transient migrants, tend to be rare. Based on a study of contract Mexican farm labour in Canada, Leigh Binford (2009: 512-515) points out that while discontent at working conditions among migrant workers clearly exists, it develops “under… severe structural constraints” and the potential for collective resistance tends to be impeded by possible disciplinary reprisals from employers and migrants’ own economic compulsions. Binford does note that wildcat strikes and work stoppages protesting abusive treatment and poor housing conditions have occasionally occurred there even though suspected “ringleaders” were subsequently forcefully deported back to Mexico (ibid: 513, 515, 517).

At the same time, the mid-2000s saw a sudden explosion of strikes and protests among contract migrant construction workers in Dubai and other cities in the United Arab Emirates (Human Rights Watch, 2006: 29-37; Buckley, 2013). Buckley’s (ibid) study of this phenomenon revealed that the geographic concentration of the migrant labour force within labour camps – or “mass-worker households” as she terms them – provided a platform for workers to mobilise and act upon their workplace grievances. Crucially, Buckley points out that the Emirati state was unable to quell the strikes using “tools of discipline and coercion” such as mass incarceration and deportation because it would adversely affect the building boom which had appeared vulnerable at that point (ibid: 268). The state therefore sought to spatially contain worker agitation by “privatising” these protests – collective bargaining was only allowed within labour camps that workers belonged to (ibid 268-270).

**NGO advocacy and activism**

More often, however, political contestation involving transnational contract workers in contemporary migrant labour regimes in Asia tends to take the form of NGO advocacy and activism. NGOs or faith-based groups in both receiving and sending countries often lobby on behalf of or together with migrant workers to push for reform in labour and recruitment laws and practices (Lyons, 2005, 2006, 2009; Ball and Piper, 2006; Constable, 2007, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007; Hsia, 2009).
NGO advocacy can be locally based within host societies where locally-based NGOs, formed by citizens, lobby host states to concede rights to and improve the general working conditions of migrant workers. NGO activism can also expand out to transnational networks of regional or global NGOs that form broad coalitions to pressure both receiving and sending states to improve the social conditions of trans-border labour movements, particularly recruitment practices. Most NGOs start off providing pastoral care and legal assistance to migrant workers facing personal troubles. Assistance cases are then used as a basis to lobby relevant government ministries to reform migrant worker legislation to mitigate their vulnerability at the workplace (Ball and Piper, 2006; Constable, 2009; Lyons, 2009).

While migrant labour advocacy is rarely as confrontational and antagonistic as direct industrial action, it can gain important concessions from sending or receiving states that improve the working conditions of migrant workers. Ford and Piper (2007) demonstrate, in the case of Hong Kong, that NGOs have succeeded in having migrant domestic workers in that country “incorporated in the formal industrial relations system, overcoming the barriers to unionisation imposed by nationality, temporary status and the nature of domestic work itself” (ibid: 77). Through her ethnographic study of Filipino migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Constable (2007) demonstrates that the degree of employment protection and migrant rights offered to migrant workers by the state can be attributed to the accomplishments of coalitions between migrant workers and migrant worker activists in Hong Kong.

In comparison, Lyons (2005, 2009), Piper (2006) and Ford and Piper (2007) have noted that NGO advocacy in Singapore has been “comparatively muted” (Ford and Piper, 2007: 75) and their political gains have been modest or limited. They explain that this is largely due to the illiberal and authoritarian political environment in Singapore which leaves civil society very little space for contestation and limits the advocacy strategies of local NGOs (Piper, 2006; Lyons, 2005, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007). Piper (2006) and Lyons (2009) additionally point out the lack of transnational networks among NGOs in Singapore which would otherwise allow them to circumvent the tight controls of the Singapore state. These explanations are, however, limited in that they are unable to explain the fact that NGO advocacy has prompted small-scale reforms to migrant labour laws within this authoritarian political context. There is, therefore, a need to examine what political spaces or opportunities are available or created rather than explaining the
limitations of advocacy in terms of state authoritarianism. Furthermore, by focusing solely on the repressive nature of the broader political regime in Singapore, these works do not consider the various strategies for the containment of conflict that the PAP-state has used in recent times to enhance the durability of its rule (Rodan, 2008). State responses to NGO contestation, not all of them repressive, need to be further examined for the way in which they limit or co-opt migrant labour advocacy.

The body of literature reviewed in this section reveals that while state coercion – in the form of migrant labour regimes – renders migrant workers politically powerless, migrant labour struggles for better working conditions and regime reform are not wholly averted nor do they cease to exist. It is also clear that powerlessness does indeed limit the potential of migrant workers to self-organise. Coalitions with faith-based or civil society groups somewhat address these impediments by opening up spaces for political contention. Migrant labour advocacy for regime reform can, again, be impeded or limited by the nature of state-civil society relations, as the Singapore case reveals.

Limitations

While the literature offers a good understanding of how overt and collective migrant worker struggles develop and play out, it does not sufficiently explain how these struggles or tensions come about. The focus is largely on the means of political contestation rather than the roots or “social foundations” of contestation (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2012; Rodan, 2013). For instance, while these studies look at the limits of NGO contention in Singapore, they do not examine the driving forces behind this contention. They, therefore, cannot explain why contention even takes place. Despite this, a number of works (Constable, 2007; Binford, 2009; Buckley, 2013) provide a clear indication that these tensions, like those observed in Singapore, arise from workplace relations. Buckley (2013), for instance, indicates that worker dissatisfaction over the non-payment of wages, the lack of parity in wage-rates between old and new workers and expensive and poor living conditions motivated them to strike. The migrant workers featured in Constable’s (2007) and Binford’s (2009) analyses had comparable grievances that mostly originated in the workplace. Yet, the way in which grievances form in the workplace and the manner in which they transform into collective struggles are hardly unproblematic and need to be interrogated further.
Constable’s (2007) account, in particular, highlights the problematic manner in which workplace tensions form and transform into political mobilisation. Particular case studies presented (ibid: 158-159) tend to suggest that migrant workers become more politically active because of the various difficulties they face at work. Constable, however, recognises that political mobilisation of migrant workers in alliance with NGOs can be limited by the nature of domestic work, migrant docility, self-discipline, political apathy; and of particular significance to this thesis, tactical accommodation (ibid: 181-200). By adopting the standpoint of migrant workers, Constable is able to lay out their objectives of migration – migrant workers are not as concerned with “agitating for radical change” (ibid: 201) but are more concerned with the needs of their families back home (ibid: 193-195; 200-201). At work, migrant domestic workers want to be treated with greater empathy and they do this not by demanding it, but attempt to earn it by complying with the rules that subordinate them (ibid: 201). The variable nature of workplace tensions and their links to more organised struggles need to be further interrogated. This is done by examining what goes on in the workplaces occupied by migrant workers.

**Workplace Struggles and “Everyday Resistance”**

A number of recent works have managed to draw out the dynamics of workplace struggles between migrant workers and their employers (Sargeson, 1999, 2001; Pinches, 2001; Abdullah, 2005; de Genova, 2005, 2006; Pun, 2005; Bauder, 2006; Constable, 2007; White, 2008). Drawing on James C. Scott’s (1985, 1990) ideas of “everyday resistance” and “infrapolitics”, as well as Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of “tactics”, these works emphasise the less organised, more individualised and covert forms of worker resistance in the workplace.

The literature here analyses two general types of migrant worker “infrapolitics”. The first type involves struggles over the everyday representations of migrant workers in the form of identity politics. Based on Scott’s (1990: 198) taxonomy of “infrapolitics”, these analyses tend to focus on aspects of status and ideological domination, such as humiliation and insults, rather than aspects of material domination such as economic exploitation. A significant characteristic of these analyses is that they highlight how migrant workers contest or reject dominant discourses or ideologies that inscribe negative identities upon them. The focus is, therefore, on the agency of migrant workers
in contesting gender relations (Mills, 1999, 2005; Cravey, 2005; Pun, 2005), “racial” discrimination (Abdullah, 2005), religious and rural hierarchies (Cravey, 2005; Pun, 2005), inter-generational dynamics (Mills, 1999) and sex and gender (Cravey, 2005; Pun, 2005) together with the myriad of everyday social practices within which these contestations are embedded.

The second type of analysis, which is more relevant to the present agenda, focuses explicitly on struggles over the terms of class exploitation and addresses what Scott (1990: 198) calls material domination, such as struggles over the appropriation of labour, grain and taxes through slavery, corvée and landlordism. While the focus on identity politics remains, this is understood as one of the many forms that class struggle between migrant workers and their employers can take in the workplace. A crucial contribution made by some of these works (particularly, Sargeson, 1999; Pinches, 2001; de Genova, 2006) is that these allow us to start seeing how such struggles are actually engendered. From these works, we can broadly observe that the forms of workplace struggles are specific and contingent on how the exploitation of migrant workers are organised or structured within respective host societies by the state and their direct employers, as well as the types of ideological or political resources – such as discourses of gender, ethnicity and nationalism – that migrant workers bring into receiving societies.

For example, Nicholas de Genova’s (2006) account of undocumented Latino migrant workers in Chicago shows how the experience of labour is shaped by the way American society is racialised and gendered in the interest of capitalist accumulation. This set the context within which Latino migrant workers sought to resist managerial control and exploitation within the worksite. De Genova highlights the masculine ethos of recklessness among workers who were aware of, but disregarded, safety hazards at work. This had the effect of transposing the structural vulnerability of workers into a “defiant but empty bravado” (ibid: 248).

In a similar vein, Michael Pinches (2001), in his account of Filipino overseas migrant workers, argues that the class experiences of these migrant workers are understood and expressed in assertions of distinctive ethnic and national identities. These assertions of Filipino identity are not simply a reaction to the ethnic and racial discrimination they face abroad, but are shown to be targeted at ways in which management and host states
attempt to control them as a labour force. In such a scenario, ethnic and national identity takes on a distinct class meaning when faced with various forms of labour control such as exclusion from host communities, regulation and control of labour camps, hostility and abuse at the worksite, etc. – all of which serve to legitimise the class exploitation of migrant workers. While the assertion and consciousness of a Filipino identity allows these migrant workers to collectively resist class exploitation with an “informal, covert kind of trade unionism” (ibid: 201), many of these workers are prepared to tolerate hardship and abuse because working abroad offers a chance at limited upward social mobility back home (ibid: 187).

Finally, in her study of the genesis of a Chinese migrant working class within the development of capitalism in China, Sally Sargeson (1999) demonstrates that capitalism in China is constituted on the basis of place, power and particularism which entailed that class formation and class consciousness among rural-to-urban working class migrants are likewise expressed based on these three elements. Locality, social networks based on power and guanxi, wealth and conspicuous consumption are primary points of how workers experience exploitation, construct their sense of working class identity and resist exploitation. For instance, guanxi (political patronage between the state and capital, as well as patronage between employers and privileged non-migrant working class fractions), social networks, negative stereotypes of rural migrants, patterns of sociability in urban neighbourhoods and particular strands of morality are used by employers and the state to entrench and legitimise the exploitation of migrant workers from the countryside. Workplace resistance takes the form of these same place-based identifiers and confronts these same forms of power and exclusion.

What sets Sargeson’s account apart from the other works in this vein is that the workplace is conceptualised as a labour process in capitalist society. It is therefore the way that production – the extraction of surplus value, in its abstract form – and hence labour control is organised around practices of patronage and status which shapes the form of workplace struggles. Class conflict – the struggle over the effort-reward bargain within production – is therefore played out, in part, as an identity politics. The struggle over names and naming is a manifestation of the struggle over managerial control of workers’ bodies, time and energy, struggles over production spaces and processes of wage distribution. The struggle over the meaning of names is a struggle over the legitimacy of the terms of exploitation.
The Approach: The Centrality of Production Politics

The existing literature on migrant labour politics, therefore, pays scant attention to the questions posed on the forms of workplace struggles and their impact on the migrant labour regime. Nonetheless, it contains useful analytical contributions to developing an approach to answering these questions. Firstly, the political economy literature has contributed a clear definition of a migrant labour regime as legal-political structures set up by the state to regulate the contradictions of capital. This is done by rendering migrant workers politically powerless – they are denied citizenship rights and the benefits that come with it; they are made occupationally immobile and deportable and are often cut-off from trade union movements. Secondly, works on the political mobilisation of migrant workers have demonstrated that overt struggles on the part of, or on behalf of, migrant workers are not precluded by powerlessness but can often be impeded by it or other factors of structural coercion such as state authoritarianism. Finally, the literature on migrant workers’ “everyday resistances” indicates that political powerlessness, together with a range of other social factors, has a constitutive effect on the nature of workplace struggles.

In order to understand how workplace struggles between Bangladeshi construction workers and their employers come about and take a given form, as well as the implications these struggles have for Singapore’s migrant labour regime, there is a need to look for causal connections between these workplace struggles – or production politics as I term them – and the migrant labour regime. To this end, the approach in this thesis combines a political economy analysis of Singapore’s migrant labour regime with an in-depth analysis – largely informed by Labour Process Theory (LPT) – of the production politics of Bangladeshi construction workers. The approach used here, by and large, follows the tradition of critical political economy scholarship on labour politics in Asia in tracing the impact of labour politics on the transformation of political regimes (e.g. Hadiz, 1997; Koo, 2001; Brown, 2004; Deyo, 2012; Hutchison, 2012). The distinction between my approach and the critical political economy tradition is that the former delves into the micro-level aspects of production politics in order to reveal their contingent and variable outcomes (c.f. Koo, 2001). As I will subsequently show, variable micro-level outcomes have differing implications for the extent to which macro-level challenges to the migrant labour regime can take place.
A key aspect of such an approach involves conceptualising workplace struggles as production politics – struggles between workers and owners/management over the concrete processes of exploitation, or in effect, the effort-reward bargain (Burawoy, 1985; S. Cohen, 1987; Hart, 1991; Sargeson, 1999). Production politics may take many forms such as struggles over working conditions (Thompson, 1966: 189-269); struggles over wage-rates and managerial authority (S. Cohen, 1987: 43-46; Sargeson, 1999: 170-184); or struggles over patriarchal control in the workplace (Ong, 1987; Hart, 1991). The objective is to explain what form production politics takes among Bangladeshi migrant workers on Singaporean construction sites, why they take this particular form and what implications do their outcomes hold for the migrant labour regime in Singapore.

In view of these concerns, Labour Process Theory (LPT) offers useful concepts to approach an analysis of production politics. The LPT literature was primarily concerned with the transformation of the nature of work under capitalism and initially sought to critique perspectives offered by scientific management and organisation theories (e.g. Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979; Littler, 1982). The latter perspectives had based their analyses on assumptions of “underlying harmony” and the “necessity of social control” at the workplace. Scientific management and organisation theories, therefore, saw the problem of the workplace as one of worker “idiosyncrasy” and “conformity” (Burawoy, 1979: 7-10). LPT, on the other hand, sought to understand how conflict within the worksite (i.e. production politics) came to be constituted and manifested in relation to transformations in the capitalist labour process (ibid). For the influential Marxist stream within LPT, their starting point was not the problem of worker rationality or motivation, but rather the abstract contradictions of capitalist accumulation which drive production (Hyman, 1975; Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Friedman, 1977, 1978; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979).

The workplace is conceptualised as a labour process in capitalist society where employers or management seek to realise their objectives of valorisation (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977). It is insufficient for capital to simply purchase the labour-power of workers in order for production to take place; they still need to continuously get work out of workers (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977; Marx, 1977: 293-306;
Friedman, 1977, 1978; Burawoy, 1979; Thompson, 1989). Employer strategies of control, therefore, essentially involve the regulation of the effort-reward bargain through the direction of work tasks, the supervision and evaluation of production and mechanisms for discipline and reward (Edwards, 1979: 18; Thompson, 1989: 122). The politics of production, thus, can be more neatly defined as the struggles around this very process of control.

Employer control strategies are broadly analysed in terms of coercion and/or consent. These two general control strategies are not exclusive and are often used together to varying extents under different prevailing political and economic conditions. Coercive control strategies, also referred to as “direct” or “simple control”, refer to managerial strategies based on managerial direction, coercive threats, close supervision and hierarchical and despotic forms of managerial authority (Marx, 1977: 549-550; Friedman, 1977: 78; Edwards, 1979: 18-19). Coercive control strategies are, thus, managerial directions based on extracting compliance out of workers through explicit or implicit threats of reprisal/punishment or even offers of rewards.

Control based on worker consent, otherwise referred to as “autonomous responsibility” or “structural control”, involves the reorganisation of the technical and social aspects of the labour process where the coordination and supervision of work tasks become embedded into technical and bureaucratic procedures. Under these control regimes, the wage-effort bargain between workers and employers is regulated and maintained through technical and bureaucratic procedures rather than through the arbitrary despotism of the foreman, supervisor, manager or owner (Edwards, 1979: 110). This control strategy can also involve management attempting to win the loyalty of the workers to make them identity with the firm’s goals (Friedman, 1977: 84).

While workers under coercive production regimes tend to “give way” to threats of punishment, consent implies “some level of agreement” to work relations (Thompson, 1989: 176). In other words, workers are no longer made to work through coercive threats from management but actively participate in their own exploitation on their own accord (ibid: 177). It is the bureaucratic and technical organisation of the labour process that forestalls worker resistance to control and makes them work in a consenting manner (Burawoy, 1979). Conflict within such production regimes tends to become individualised rather than collectivised (Edwards, 1979: 154) or is dispersed into intra-
group conflicts between workers (Burawoy, 1979: 69). Alternatively, labour-management conflict within the labour process in such cases is often “externalised” into collective bargaining mechanisms which also help to create worker consent towards the wage-bargaining mechanisms within capitalism (Burawoy, 1979: 95-122).

What accounts for the form of production politics?

Michael Burawoy’s (1985) The Politics of Production is a useful starting point for understanding how employer strategies of control in the labour process take a given form – i.e. coercive, hegemonic or any given combination. Burawoy argues that the predominant form of control used by capital within a given historical context is largely contingent on the manner in which the state intervenes in the labour process (ibid: 122). In other words, he demonstrates how state-level labour regimes – mostly in the form of labour legislation – influence the form of production regimes; i.e. employer strategies of control in the labour process. The transformation of production regimes in the United States and Britain after World War Two from coercive to hegemonic, for instance, is explained in terms of state policies which constituted the social wage and legislated for employment rights. These effectively placed restrictions on managerial discretion and the extent to which employers could exploit wage dependence. Employers were no longer able to fully rely on the coercive “economic whip of the market” to control workers. Workers had to be “persuaded” to cooperate with management, and hegemonic controls thus prevailed over coercive strategies (ibid: 122-127).

Migrant labour regimes, on the other hand, represent the reverse of such hegemonic regimes. Contract migrants are systematically denied citizenship rights and hence have no access to the social wage provided by the state. Furthermore, certain categories of migrant workers are often excluded from labour legislation or face obstacles in asserting their employment rights. The early political economy scholars on labour migration argued that migrant worker powerlessness essentially translated into coercive controls in the workplace (Castells, 1975; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988). The cheap and abundant supply of powerless migrants would allow employers to control these workers through threats and intimidation (ibid). Such an argument has two particular problems. Firstly, these scholars do not make an explicit distinction between the use of coercion to set workers to work and the use of coercion to suppress worker agitation in the labour
process. This distinction has significant implications for the way in which production politics are interpreted and will be raised in Chapters Four and Six.

Secondly, these scholars tend to interpret migrant labour regimes as representing a confluence of interests between states (economic growth) and segments of capital (cheap, powerless labour force). Robin Cohen (2006), however, suggests that the relation between state migrant worker policies and employer interests may not always be so clear cut and points out that state and employer interests can frequently contradict one another. Donna Turner (2005), in her analysis of the migrant labour regime in Malaysia, provides a more insightful view of the tensions between governments and employers. Turner shows that low wages and repressive working conditions of migrant workers delivered high rates of economic growth which, in turn, funded various social and political concessions delivered to the local workforce (ibid: 53-56, 62). The government’s subsequent shift towards a “Knowledge-based Economy” involved reducing the economy’s reliance on unskilled migrant workers in favour of more capital-intensive areas of production (ibid: 58-61). The tightening of immigration rules to restrict employer access to migrant labour was met with strong opposition from construction and manufacturing industry groups as they compromised the survival and profitability of these industrial sectors (ibid: 60-61).

In understanding how Singapore’s migrant labour policies shape the form of production politics among Bangladeshi workers in the construction site, particular tensions between government policy objectives and the interests of construction contractors are explored (Chapter Two). This entails a political economy analysis of Singapore’s migrant labour regime. By evaluating the extent to which migrant labour policies have historically converged with or diverged from contractor interests, I demonstrate how contractor responses to various policies – particularly the levy system and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) within the context of migrant worker powerlessness – have significant ramifications for how they seek to control migrant workers in the workplace.

At the same time, the shape of production politics is not determined by the political economy of the migrant labour regime alone. In explaining the form of production politics, the LPT literature tends to exclude or ignore factors outside the labour process which may shape worker orientations to work and control. Burawoy (1979), for
instance, argues that it is the technical organisation of the labour process and internal workplace relations rather than the socialisation of workers outside the labour process which shapes the nature of production politics (ibid: 135-157). This view has since been debunked by a number of ethnographic studies of working-class factions which extend their enquiry beyond the confines of production (e.g. Willis, 1977; Ong, 1987; Hart, 1991; Sargeson, 1999; Koo, 2001). These works demonstrate that worker responses to control are also influenced by broader ideologies and social arrangements such as gender relations (Ong, 1987; Hart, 1991), religious institutions and ideologies (Munck, 1988: 92-103; Koo, 2001) and patronage networks (Sargeson, 1999).

In understanding the responses of Bangladeshi migrant workers to workplace control, it is necessary to consider the material and ideological circumstances under which these workers enter the labour process. This involves examining the specific objectives and circumstances of Bangladeshi temporary migration to Singapore. Using Ortner’s (2003) reading of Sartre (1963), the circumstances and objectives of migration are conceptualised as a “migration project”. For Sartre (1963: 91-100), the “project” is a way of looking at praxis or human agency where praxis is shaped by the material conditions of existence and has the potential to reshape or reproduce these conditions. The project is the attempt by social actors to transcend or go beyond the material conditions that they face (ibid: 150). In her adaptation of the concept, Ortner (2003: 24) extends the subjective dimension to mean broad plans or schemes in which something – social status or economic and political opportunities – is “always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired”. This conceptualisation essentially refers to understanding temporary labour migration from Bangladesh to Singapore in relation to the “real and present factors which condition it” as well as the “object” (i.e. wealth, status, improved life-chances) that actors are “trying to bring into being” (Sartre, 1963: 91).

Within the present context, this involves examining the socio-economic conditions that make migration necessary; the migration objectives of these workers in attempting to transform these conditions; the moral expectations of migration; and the political economy of the recruitment process. Thus, migration projects represent the immediate interests of Bangladeshi contract workers as they enter the labour process; and provide a clear picture of what is at stake for them as they do so.
In order to explain the prevalent form of production politics among Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore, the political economy of the migrant labour regime and the nature of migration projects are examined for how they influence employer control strategies and worker responses to control in the labour process. The migrant labour regime produces employer tendencies to sustain profitability through wage pressure strategies. Employers do this by transferring significant portions of the administrative cost of hiring and maintaining migrant workers onto the migrant workers themselves through depressing and stagnating wages, wage deductions and kickbacks for employment. The regime also ensures the powerlessness of migrant workers which inhibits their ability to formally challenge these strategies. At the same time, migration projects are also examined for the manner in which they influence the way these workers respond to the wage pressure strategies.

The most crucial aspect of the approach, however, involves focusing on the manner in which political powerlessness and migration projects are manifested within the dynamics of control – i.e. the process by which construction contractors set their Bangladeshi migrant workers to work. The dynamics of control includes employer strategies of control as well as the technical (or physical) manner in which production is organised. Employer control strategies together with worker responses produce an effort-reward bargain. This is a constantly negotiated “frontier of control” (Edwards, 1979) where contractors and workers seek to push the line in order to realise their immediate objectives of profit and successful migration respectively. Within these dynamics, I pick out ways in which powerlessness and migration projects feature, paying attention to the various ways in which they intersect with and within control dynamics to reveal how opportunities for workers to strive towards their immediate objectives are both foreclosed and created. In accounting for the form of production politics using such an approach, I draw further attention to specific factors such as the dispersed geography of production; the prevalence of differential deployments; the strategic application of coercion in the workplace; as well as the specific implications migration projects hold for workplace politics.

5 Throughout this thesis, I refer to “wage pressures” as the strategy commonly used by construction (as well as shipyard and cleaning) contractors to stifle the monthly wages or wage-rates of their migrant worker employees. As I will go on to show in Chapter Two, this strategy is used as a response to various state migrant worker laws which create additional cost pressures for contractors. The use of “wage pressures” in this thesis is incongruous with the common usage of the term.
The politics of obedience

I demonstrate that, in this context, production politics tend to take the form of a “politics of obedience” where workers tactically accommodate contractor control whilst attempting to informally re-negotiate the effort-reward bargain. This is in spite of overwhelming worker grievances over employer wage pressure strategies. Obedience, as distinct from coercion and consent, is understood as a form of control based primarily (but not entirely) on the authoritative commands of work superiors such as bosses, managers and supervisors. Obedience indicates a willingness to work neither out of fear of reprisal (coercion) nor out of an ideological alignment with organisational objectives (consent), but primarily out of deference or obligation to the will of significant others who hold positions of authority within the firm. This is not to say that these workers do not work under implicit threats. Workers are constantly aware of their powerless political status, especially their deportability. However, as Chapters Four and Five demonstrate, implicit threats do not often translate into coercive forms of control as workers usually manage to circumvent these through obedience.

I therefore explicitly focus on this tactical aspect of worker obedience. The concept of “tactics” is derived from Sargeson’s (2001: 54) reading of de Certeau (1984) which refers to “the manner in which the less powerful, at critical points in time, put systems of knowledge and management into use in ways not intended by their makers, with a view to subversion or carving out a space which they can manoeuvre in”. Worker obedience to the commands of work superiors is understood as a form of tactical accommodation of control. As I show in Chapter Four, workers demonstrate obedience to their work superiors, despite enduring grievances over the nature of the effort-reward bargain, for two reasons. They do so to avoid open confrontation with the latter so as to keep the coercive capacity of employers at arm’s length. Furthermore, obedience, at the individual level, is used as a bargaining chip of sorts to informally re-negotiate the effort-reward bargain where workers seek to elicit better rewards (or deployments which require lesser efforts) from their employers and supervisors. The politics of obedience is, thus, the non-confrontational process of contestation and negotiation over the terms of obedience between workers and their work superiors. In the words of

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6 As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, the authority of work superiors tends to be primarily formal – i.e. derived from their job designation or ownership – but are manifested in highly personalised ways – i.e. considerable amounts of informal face-to-face interaction – in the labour process.
Barrington Moore Jr. (1978: 18), this process essentially involves a “continual probing” on the part of subordinate and dominant groups to “find out what they can get away with, to test and discover the limits of obedience and disobedience”.

*How production politics impact upon the migrant labour regime*

In examining how production politics impact upon the migrant labour regime, I argue that the variable and contingent outcomes of these struggles have a definitive bearing on the extent to which the migrant labour regime can be contested. Two particular outcomes are highlighted – the perpetuation of tactical accommodation through obedience-politics and the collapse of obedience into confrontational struggles in the labour process. Two corresponding forms of worker “everyday resistances” – work pacing and flight – are also examined to reveal the workplace circumstances under which they are engendered and played out. The implications these outcomes hold for the migrant labour regime are then examined to reveal the extent to which they allow this regime to be challenged, particularly through NGO advocacy and activism.

The stability and coherence of the politics of obedience is, firstly, problematised. One characteristic of worker obedience is that it belies enduring tensions between the wage pressure strategies of employers and the migration projects of workers, where the former constantly undermines the latter to varying extents. This tense status-quo is further threatened as contractors formulate new wage pressures or seek to intensify the work regime to protect profits amid rising levy and dormitory rates in Singapore. I therefore focus on these tensions in order to document the different ways in which obedience politics unfolds as well as the political implications these various outcomes hold for the migrant labour regime. The focus is therefore on how obedience is perpetuated or restored in the workplace and how it transforms into overt and confrontational conflict between workers and employers.

Through a case-study of the labour process within a particular construction firm, I demonstrate how the politics of obedience is restored as new wage pressure strategies threaten to escalate existing worker grievances over pay and working conditions. Attention is brought to workers’ practice of work pacing – an informal form of output restriction – upon which obedience is premised. I discovered that work pacing allowed workers informally to “correct” an effort-reward bargain that they otherwise felt was “unfair”, thus containing their discontent. The introduction of wage-deductions for rain-
stoppages, however, upset this fragile balance as workers’ monthly earnings dropped and opportunities for work pacing became scarce during rainy periods.

In accounting for the restoration of obedience under these circumstances, I emphasise the autonomy and agency of supervisors in making interventions – securing small concessions from management; collaborating in work pacing and reordering production sequence – into the production process which dissipated seething worker discontent and restored obedience and work pacing. Existing theories that focus on the bureaucratisation of managerial control (Friedman, 1977, 1978; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979; Thompson, 1989) and the “contradictory class location” of supervisors (Edwards, 1973; Wright, 1982) are insufficient to explain why supervisors made such interventions and how it was possible for them to do so. I argue that it is the relative autonomy of the supervisory class from management that generates a distinctive set of class interests for the former which are separate from those of management and workers. In assessing the broader implications of the restoration of obedience amid enduring worker grievances, I emphasise the manner in which these grievances came to be subsequently depoliticised in the workplace as a result of supervisory interventions. This depoliticisation ensured that grievances did not transform into significantly antagonistic forms of confrontation with management.

In explaining how tactical accommodation transforms into openly contentious struggles in the labour process, I focus on a common form of overt resistance among Bangladeshi workers – flight. Flight essentially involves migrant workers deserting the workplace and employer-provided accommodation in order to seek outside assistance; particularly from NGOs. I specifically examine “causes” and “courses” of flight to reveal the workplace circumstances that engender flight and its political significance within the structural context of Singapore’s migrant labour regime.

From NGO case-file and worker interview data, I discovered three particular forms of workplace disputes that lead to worker flight: disputes over intensive wage pressures and work regimes; under-deployment; and disputes over work injuries. Within these circumstances, workers are unable to use tactical obedience because the effort-reward bargain is severely undermined; either through the non-payment of wages, the absence of work or the inability of the worker to work due to injury. Furthermore, workers’ migration projects, and at times their physical well-being, are immediately threatened.
This drives workers to confront their employers who inevitably unleash their coercive power. At this point, again, a distinction is made between employers’ use of coercion to set workers to work and the use of coercion to resolve disputes to reveal that threats, violence and forceful repatriation are usually used for the latter.

The course of flight often involves workers seeking NGO assistance in the form of food, shelter and legal assistance. Their grievances are translated into formal claims at the Ministry of Manpower. The dynamics of flight are interpreted within the legal-political context of the migrant labour regime where employers and their migrant workers are administratively “bonded” to each other. The particular nature of “bondage” here differs significantly from documented forms of labour desertion such as antebellum slavery in the United States (Camp, 2004) and indentured labour in colonial South Asia (Behal, 1985). Within this context, however, flight represents more than an attempt to escape employer punishment or coercion: it is an overt refusal to work; a contestation of the employer’s sovereignty to unilateral repatriation; a contestation of coercive strategies to resolve disputes; and an attempt by workers to mobilise political resources beyond the workplace.

Finally, I examine links between these contingent outcomes of the politics of obedience with the only concerted challenge to Singapore’s migrant labour regime in recent years – advocacy and activism on behalf of migrant workers by a small group of local NGOs. The literature on contentious politics and social movements in general (Brockett, 1991; Kriesi et. al., 1992; Tarrow, 1994; McAdam, 1999) as well as those on migrant labour advocacy in Singapore (Lyons, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009; Piper, 2005, 2006; Ford and Piper, 2007; Yee and Lyons, 2009) tend to focus on the means of civil society contention rather than the driving forces behind it. Applied to the Singapore context, such approaches reveal a relatively closed “political opportunity structure” and a restricted civil society space for advocacy groups to push their claims. This does little more than state the obvious – that civil society groups are weak and their impact is limited, largely due to the authoritarian nature of the Singapore state. The approach espoused by these works do not sufficiently explain why migrant labour NGOs have been able to contest aspects of the migrant labour regime and push the Manpower Ministry to make small but significant reforms to migrant labour laws.
By adopting Jayasuria and Rodan (2007) and Rodan’s (2013) framework on modes of political participation, I uncover the “social foundations” or the socio-political dynamics underlying the extent and nature of civil society space. Rather than dwelling on what spaces have been closed up by state authoritarianism, I focus on what kinds of spaces or opportunities are available for NGOs; how these spaces or opportunities are connected to different outcomes of production politics; and the varied manner in which the authoritarian state responds to these challenges either through incorporation or repression. This involves situating the substantive form of advocacy within the modes of participation framework in order to understand how advocacy is conducted within both state-sponsored and autonomous sites. In accounting for these spaces and opportunities for advocacy as well as the nature of its impact – particularly in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis from late 2008 – I stress the significance of particular production politics outcomes as the driving force behind this advocacy. Specifically, I demonstrate that the extent to which NGOs were able to carve out spaces of advocacy are contingent on the extent to which the politics of obedience collapses into overtly contentious struggles and subsequently flight. Finally, I highlight the manner in which the Singapore state deals with different forms of migrant labour contestation – e.g. advocacy within state-sponsored sites versus attempts to collectively mobilise migrant workers. In particular, I highlight the manner in which the state attempts to normalise the migrant labour regime through administrative concessions whilst suppressing or containing the collective mobilisation of migrant workers.

Types of Data

The data collected for this thesis are divided into four categories. The most significant part was a detailed and nuanced documentation of the production politics of Bangladeshi migrant construction workers in Singapore. This involved uncovering the specific kinds of control strategies utilised by construction contractors and revealing how these strategies are manifested within the working day, particularly in terms of commanding and directing work. I sought to understand how workers felt about these existing work arrangements in relation to their everyday working lives and the circumstances and objectives of migration. I also sought to reveal how, and under what circumstances, these workers concretely respond to these control strategies. Finally, I documented the different ways in which these interactions between workers and
contractors unfolded and the specific and differing outcomes that were consequentially produced.

In addition to documenting the production politics of Bangladeshi migrant workers, the empirical basis of this thesis extends out from the labour process and into the other social and political realms that shape and are shaped by it – Singapore’s migrant labour regime; workers’ migration projects; and NGO advocacy. The historical transformation of migrant workers laws and policies – particularly the levy system and the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act – as well as contractor responses to these, is documented to inform a political economy analysis of the migrant labour regime. The empirical basis of Bangladeshi migration projects is established by charting the socio-economic circumstances of migration; the ensuing objectives of migration; the socio-moral expectations of migration; and the nature of the recruitment process. Finally, the substantive form of NGO advocacy – the various ways in which NGOs lobby the state; their demands and recommendations and the impact made – together with the state’s responses to these are documented. The data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews with 45 Bangladeshi migrant workers, a four-month participant observation stint at a local construction firm and the use of 50 case-file documents from a local migrant worker NGO. A number of secondary sources such as media, government, construction industry and NGO reports were also used. Finally, targeted interviews were conducted with “specialist key informants” such as contractors and NGO directors in both Singapore and Bangladesh in order to fill particular gaps in the data.

**Sources and Methods**

*Interviews with Bangladeshi migrant workers*

Between October 2010 and May 2012, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 45 Bangladeshi migrant workers who were working or had worked in Singapore as semi- or unskilled construction workers on work permits. Eight pilot interviews were conducted with key informants in Singapore between October and November 2010, while another 24 interviews were conducted there between December 2011 and January 2012. The remaining 13 respondents were interviewed in their home villages in the

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7 Throughout this thesis, pseudonyms are used for all workers and firms except for those named in media sources.
Bangladeshi districts of Sirajganj (five) and Comila (seven) during a field trip in April/May 2012.

The interviews were a source for two of the four parts of data required – the documentation of workplace dynamics and the nature of migration projects. For this purpose, the interviews were divided into two parts. The first part solicited information about workers’ migration projects and covered the socio-economic backgrounds of their families and their motivations for coming to Singapore. I was particularly interested in the way these workers spoke of the issues they and their families faced and how migration to Singapore would address these issues. I did this to determine their orientation towards migration and what labour migration meant to them and their families within the context of rural Bangladesh. As an important supplement to the first part of the interviews, I conducted a short-stint (about three weeks in total) of non-participant observation in six villages in the Sirajganj and Comila districts in Bangladesh. During this period, I followed two of my key respondents back home after their respective stints in Singapore. This not only allowed me to recruit interview participants in these villages through my key respondents, but also to observe the ways in which people in rural Bangladesh talked about Singapuri labour migration and the world abroad as well as the kinds of status expectations that were placed on return migrants. These observations were particularly useful in revealing the moral expectations that temporary labour migrants were held to within their rural communities (Chapter Three).

The second, and longer, part of these interviews focused on the employment experiences of these workers. Rather than analysing the overall work experiences of individual workers, I analysed individual work stints to examine how the dynamics of control played out within particular employment instances. While I asked workers to speak freely about their experiences in the workplace, I also requested that they structure their narratives chronologically according to their respective employment stints. Since I was unable to observe my respondents at work, I asked them to provide detailed descriptions of the production arrangements, work direction, supervision and surveillance within individual firms. Beyond that, respondents spoke freely about episodes of conflict and tension at work that they thought were significant. These

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8 The occupational immobility of contract migrant workers in Singapore effectively meant that each employment stint was with only one employer.
narrative accounts provided the primary source through which production politics in the construction site were documented.

Out of the sample of 45 workers, there were a total of 103 work stints which date between the late-1990s to the present; but mostly (85 out of 103) from 2004 to 2011. At the time of the respective interviews, 15 respondents were single-stint workers, 22 had worked two to three stints, and eight workers had three or more stints under their belt. Out of the 103 stints, six stints had too little data for me to analyse. This was largely due to some respondents being reluctant to talk about particular stints in detail. I therefore based my analysis of production politics on the remaining 97 stints that had been well-documented in the interviews.

**Participant observation**

In order to gain a first-hand experience of how production politics unfold within a construction site, I conducted a four-month covert participant observation stint at a medium-sized construction firm which I shall call EW Construction in mid-2010. EW Construction was a building construction and piling contractor that subsequently moved into smaller-scale civil engineering works such as the construction of walkway and bus shelters. Out of its 200-odd semi-skilled migrant workforce (including the supervisors), 60 were Bangladeshis while the rest were mostly Indian and Burmese. The company also employed the odd Thai worker and a small handful of Singaporean supervisors. I was hired as a trainee supervisor who would work with the rank-and-file until I learnt the ropes. In this position, I was deployed as a steel-fitter on a government project involving the construction of sheltered walkways across a number of pedestrian bridges and bus stops across the island. As a result, the data gleaned from this stint are largely focused on the experience of the 20-odd steel fitters (about half of them were Bangladeshis) with whom I worked. However, during the course of work, I also managed to interact with and observe the work of the concrete workers, the scaffolders, the painters, other groups of steel-fitters and the workers employed by the company’s electrical subcontractor. In total, I interacted closely with about ten Bangladeshi workers on a daily basis and about 30-40 others on an average of twice a week.

The work-stint at EW Construction allowed me to directly observe how control strategies were applied and manifested on a day-to-day basis which could not be clearly elucidated from the interview data. I witnessed first-hand how production in a particular
construction firm was organised and how work was directed. I also directly participated in production work itself. Having said this, it was always clear from the start that I did not share the exact same experiences as my co-workers. I was neither deportable nor occupationally immobile, nor did I incur substantial debt in securing employment. However, by having to perform the same work-tasks as my co-workers, I found myself in a good position to observe the way they responded to strategies of control and could clearly document the workplace tactics of workers far more clearly than the interviews allowed me to. The data gleaned from this stint were used as a significant complement to the interview data in explaining the form of production politics in Chapter Four.

The more significant contribution the observations here made to this study, however, was not by design. The period when I was employed saw heavy rainfall which somewhat disrupted the production regime and management’s enforcement of wage-deductions for rain-stoppages. This created huge discord among the workers. I was, thus, able to observe first-hand how worker discontent over new wage pressures was defused and obedience restored. This process is well-documented and analysed in Chapter Five. The findings here are significant because they demonstrate how enduring worker discontent over employer strategies are depoliticised without the use of coercion. While not every construction firm is run like EW Construction, the findings here shed light on certain kinds of workplace dynamics – employer wage-pressures and worker grievances, accommodation and resistance – that operate, to varying extents, in other firms.

*NGO case-files*

Prior to starting this project, I was employed as a full-time case-worker at a local migrant worker NGO, Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME), from 2007 to 2009. Much of my early understanding of Bangladeshi migrant workers and the issues they face was informed by my experiences working at the men’s shelter and helpdesk. At HOME, legal assistance and shelter provision cases were documented by case-workers into individual case reports that provide information on the background of workers’ complaints, potential legal violations involved and subsequent action taken by the case-worker (e.g. lodging a work injury claim with the Manpower Ministry). It was my experience in being part of this process that informs the section on “The Course
of Flight” in Chapter Six, which illustrates how cases of worker flight from the workplace are translated into statutory claims.

While these case reports do not provide sufficient information on the entirety of workplace dynamics, a number of them provide useful and reliable documentation of the circumstances under which overt and confrontational conflicts break out in the workplace. This information complemented some of the interview data in allowing me to examine how the tactical obedience of workers transformed into episodes of employer coercion and overt worker resistance. To this end, I purposefully sampled 50 such case reports that date between 2007 and 2011\(^9\). My purposive sample had three criteria: (i) the cases had to involve Bangladeshi workers; (ii) that substantial information was provided on the background of the workers’ complaints\(^10\); and (iii) that the sample covered all major complaints made by workers to NGOs such as wage issues, work injury matters, under-deployment and forced repatriation. While most of the 50 case reports collected involved individual workers; around ten of these involved small groups of workers (three to ten), while two reports involved 45 and 100 workers respectively.

Other sources of data

A number of secondary data sources were also used. Information on the development of Singapore’s migrant labour regime and contractor responses was largely attained from a range of newspaper sources, government press releases and laws and construction industry reports. Data on Bangladeshi migration projects, particularly those pertaining to the recruitment process, were also gleaned from various media reports and published work. Data on the substance of NGO advocacy and subsequent state responses were culled from NGO research and web-news reports, various online news sources (including a number of local news blogs), and government press releases.

Finally, I interviewed a number of “key” or “specialist” informants who offered specialist or privileged knowledge of particular matters in order to fill certain gaps in the data. Four construction contractors were interviewed anonymously to gain a deeper

\(^9\) A number of these reports, between 2007 and 2009, were actually recorded by me.

\(^10\) Due to the constant shortage of case workers and heavy case-loads faced by such NGOs in Singapore, case-workers were not able to fully document every single complaint. Many times, case-workers only recorded the information necessary for legal assistance to be expedited, while leaving out the background of the dispute. I have been guilty of this myself.
understanding of how migrant labour policies affected their daily operations. While contractor responses were documented through news and industry reports, these four interviews provided some depth to understanding how policies impacted the way they made business decisions, particularly over remuneration-related matters. In Bangladesh, two founders of return-migrant welfare NGOs – Saiful Haque of WARBE\(^{11}\) and AKM Mohsin of MISAF\(^{12}\) – were interviewed. These informants were able to provide specialist knowledge about the recruitment process in Bangladesh. HOME’s then executive director (who served from 2005 to 2013) Jolovan Wham was also interviewed to provide the rationale for certain forms of NGO advocacy as well as to shed light on aspects of NGO-Ministry interactions that are not usually reported in the news media.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have developed an approach to explain how the workplace struggles of Bangladeshi construction workers in Singapore come about and take a particular form as well as the extent to which these struggles impact upon the migrant labour regime. The existing literature on migrant labour politics was discussed in relation to these questions. While these works prove to be insufficient to answer the research questions, they offer significant analytical insights towards the development of my approach.

The political economy stream within this literature provides a clear definition of a migrant labour regime as a state-constructed structure which ensures the political powerlessness of migrant workers within host societies. The contentious politics stream demonstrates that political mobilisation by, or on behalf of, migrant workers is not entirely precluded by this powerlessness but can be impeded by broader facets of structural coercion such as the case of state authoritarianism in Singapore. However, neither stream sufficiently explains how these struggles come about and pay little attention to the source of these conflicts – the workplace. To further demonstrate the political significance of workplace struggles, the “everyday resistances” stream demonstrates that political powerlessness, together with a range of other social factors, can have a constitutive effect on the nature of these workplace struggles.

\(^{11}\) The Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants

\(^{12}\) Migrant Sanctuary Foundation Bangladesh
Based on these insights, I have conceptualised these workplace struggles as production politics within a capitalist labour process where employers attempt to set their migrant workers to work through a range of control strategies. The approach involves combining a political economy analysis of Singapore’s migrant labour regime with an in-depth analysis of the production politics of Bangladeshi construction workers. The research questions are answered by examining causal links between the migrant labour regime and the form and outcomes of these production politics. Specifically, I demonstrate how Singapore’s migrant labour regime, together with the migration projects of these workers, intersect within the dynamics of control in the labour process to create a particular politics of obedience. By examining the contingent and variable outcomes of this politics of obedience, I demonstrate the extent to which differing outcomes allow local advocacy groups to push for the reform of migrant labour laws.
Chapter Two

The Political Economy of Singapore’s Migrant Labour Regime: State Policies and Contractor Strategies

This chapter deals with a significant constituent of the production politics concerning migrant workers in Singapore – the political economy of the Singapore state’s contract migrant labour regime. I investigate how Singapore’s migrant worker policy came about and, more significantly, what impacts it has on the way migrant workers are managed in the construction sites. Recent works on the subject generally argue that Singapore’s migrant worker policy is the means by which the Singapore state addresses the country’s labour shortage in order to ensure Singapore’s economic competitiveness and continued economic growth (Athukorala and Manning, 1999; Hui, 2002; Low, 2002; Rahman, 2006; Yap and Wu, 2007). More critical accounts understand the migrant labour regime as the means by which the Singapore state differentiates between different classes of migrants to ensure that semi-/unskilled migrants are only utilised to facilitate labour force flexibility and are prevented from integrating into Singapore society because their presence is seen as “undesirable” (Yeoh, 2006, 2007; Liow, 2011).

While the latter group of works provides some understanding of the general nature of migrant worker “powerlessness” in Singapore, none of these studies explicitly consider the tensions between policy makers and employers of migrant workers in the evolution of Singapore’s migrant labour policies. These works neither consider the extent to which the interests of employers (i.e. contractor capital) converge with or diverge from the objectives of governmental policy makers nor do they consider the various ways in which employers have responded to migrant worker policy implementation. They are therefore unable to explain what sorts of implications these policies have had on the way employers manage migrant workers within the site of production.

In relation to the construction industry in Singapore, I focus on two specific aspects of Singapore’s migrant worker policy – the levy system instituted in the 1980s; and legal provisions of the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) enacted in 1991 – within the existing context of general labour suppression and migrant worker powerlessness. Based on an analysis of governmental implementation and enforcement of these laws and contractor responses to them, I argue that these particular aspects of migrant worker policy produced cost pressures upon construction contractors. Under
existing conditions of migrant labour powerlessness created by the state, these cost pressures translated into a tendency among contractors to use strategies such as salary deductions, kickbacks for employment and wage depression to protect their profits and ensure their economic survival.

Policy makers had publicly stated that the migrant worker levy was introduced as a disincentive to hire migrant labour, to encourage construction contractors to move away from labour-intensive production methods in line with the government’s “Second Industrial Revolution” ethos from the late-1970s. The EFMA, first enacted in 1991, represented government attempts to regulate several different facets of the employment of migrant workers by making employers legally responsible for the basic well-being of migrant workers. Because construction contractors rarely had the resources to innovate production techniques, they saw the levy, and its gradual increases, as a direct financial penalty inflicted upon them while EFMA provisions were seen as an added financial burden. In response, contractors pursued their goals of profitability and business survival by using wage pressure strategies to transfer these costs onto their migrant workers. Within the realm of production, these strategies take the form of kickbacks for employment, withholding, depressing or stagnating wage-rates, wage deductions of various sorts and paying overtime and rest-day wages below statutory rates. These measures were possible because the political powerlessness of migrant workers – in terms of their deportability and occupational immobility as well as structural inhibitions in accessing independent trade union politics – had already been established through coercive immigration and labour laws.

Singapore’s Migrant Worker Policy

Since the 1990s, functionalist studies tend to argue that Singapore’s migrant worker policy represents government attempts to address the country’s labour shortage in order to ensure Singapore’s economic competitiveness and continued economic growth (Athukorala and Manning, 1999; Hui, 2002; Low, 2002; Rahman, 2006; Yap and Wu, 2007). These works argue that these policies stem out of “economic imperatives” (Low, 2002: 95; Rahman, 2006: 22) – Singapore’s exponential economic growth from the 1970s had led to a demand for labour and skills which could not be filled by the local populace alone. As a result, immigration policies were subsequently relaxed to allow employers within particular industries (construction, shipbuilding and repair,
manufacturing and services) to address labour shortages by importing labour (Athukorala and Manning, 1999: 142).

These studies argue that, from the late-1980s, the Singapore government showed great “sophistication” and “efficiency” (Rahman, 2006: 22) to calibrate the country’s migrant worker policy in line with the country’s economic needs and “national development priorities” (Athukorala and Manning, 1999: 146). This entailed a liberalisation of immigration policy for highly-skilled upper-end foreign professionals to fuel Singapore’s competitiveness in the “knowledge-based economy” (Low, 2002: 95) and a “closely monitored”, larger intake of semi- and unskilled migrant workers to “help dampen cyclical domestic labour shortages without imposing long-term social and political costs on the economy” (Athukorala and Manning, 1999: 143,146). It was thus argued that Singapore’s migrant worker policy represented a “highly selective policy” from which the government could “pick and choose foreign workers and talents based on economic criteria” (Low, 2002: 95) in order to maintain “a smooth flow of foreign workers consistent with the demand in (the) local labour market” (Rahman, 2006: 22).

More critical works in this field focus on the politics of this “pick and choose” aspect of the migrant labour system. Brenda Yeoh (2006), for instance, interrogates this bifurcated nature of migrant worker policy to reveal a “differential politics of inclusion and exclusion” (ibid: 36) in the regulation of different types or classes of migrants into Singapore. Robin Cohen (2006: 137-153) makes a similar point on a more global and general scale. While “foreign talents” such as highly skilled professionals, technopreneurs and investors are highly sought after to “keep Singapore in the global race”, semi- and unskilled migrant workers are treated based on a “use-and-discard policy” (Yeoh, 2006: 26, 32). The latter group are brought in only as “temporary workers” rather than as “social or political subjects” and migrant worker policies are the tools by which these workers are marginalised and denied a “permanent foothold in the geobody of the nation” (ibid: 32).

In a similar vein, Eugene Liow (2011) argues that the Work Pass system, as a significant regulating mechanism within the larger migrant worker policy, reveals the “utilitarian and instrumental nature of the Singapore state imbued with the neoliberal political rationality” which has “little or no concern for the welfare of individuals unless it proves economically expedient to do so” (ibid: 13). Liow shows that the Work Pass
system functions as a “sorting mechanism” where the flow of immigrants into Singapore is “regulated in accordance to a very specific set of criteria”, such as class and educational/skill levels, which determines whether a migrant has access to permanent residence or otherwise (ibid: 13-14). Certain types or classes of foreigners – i.e. “foreign talents” – are seen as more “desirable” (ibid: 14) and are allowed long-term residency while the long-term presence of semi- and unskilled migrant workers are deemed “highly undesirable” because of their “class, education level and/or ethnicity” (ibid). Liow argues that policy mechanisms like the Work Pass system allow the latter group to be “disposed” of – i.e. repatriated with no opportunity for citizenship or permanent residence – once their labour is no longer required (ibid: 14-15).

These more critical studies within the recent literature on Singapore’s migrant worker policy provide useful insights into how the general nature of migrant worker “powerlessness” is constructed. Specifically, these studies reveal how particular political-legal mechanisms – i.e. Work Pass regulations under EFMA – serve to ensure that semi- and unskilled migrant workers remain deportable to suit the contingent needs of the economy and are effectively cut-off from accessing citizenship and long-term residency rights.

However, like the proponents of the “labour shortage” and “economic imperatives” argument, their analysis is directed at the macro-economic or political objectives of the state. Within the literature, the state is seen to enact carefully calibrated migrant worker policies based on its economic and socio-political objectives. However, none of these studies reveal or evaluate the extent to which government objectives and policies converge with or diverge from the interests of employers of migrant workers. As such, these studies do not explicitly consider the role of tensions between government policy makers and contractor capital in the formulation and enactment of migrant worker policies.

In the construction industry, the perspectives of contractors are especially important, in this case, as they are the immediate employers of migrant labour. While these government policies have granted employers in particular industries access to migrant labour in order to ease the latter’s labour shortages, it was done under particular conditions – for instance, quotas and levies were imposed, and constantly adjusted, purportedly to regulate the quantity of semi- and unskilled workers in the country
(Athukorala and Manning, 1999: 143-144). The extent to which migrant labour policies have historically converged with or diverged from contractor interests needs further elucidation.

Within the political economy stream in the migrant labour politics literature, migrant labour regimes are often seen to serve the interests of employers (Castells, 1975; Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988). However, more recent works by Donna Turner (2005) and Robin Cohen (2006) indicate that there are often tensions between employer interests and government migrant labour policies. In the Singapore case, as I will demonstrate shortly, there is a contradiction between the PAP government’s drive towards capital-intensive productivity-based macro-economic growth and the construction industry’s reliance on “cheap” migrant labour in labour-intensive production. In order to explore how these tensions play out and shape the nature of production politics, I analyse contractor responses to two significant aspects of migrant labour policy – the levy system and the legal provisions of the EFMA – within the context of migrant worker powerlessness. This would reveal how migrant worker policy formulation and implementation, together with the contractor strategies it engenders, influences the way migrant workers are managed within the labour process.

**Regulating the Demand for Imported Labour: The Levy System**

Migrant workers were brought in, through government policies, as early as 1968 in order to address labour shortages in the economy brought about by rapid industrial growth in the late 1960s and early 70s (Pang and Lim, 1982: 549). However, the “heavy recruitment” of migrant workers during this period was additionally used by the PAP government to depress wage levels in specific labour-intensive and low value-added industries which made Singapore internationally competitive in low value-added production (Rodan, 1989: 138-139). After the global recession of 1974/75, the PAP government moved to address the economy’s labour shortage by moving the economy away from labour-intensive production methods to more capital-intensive ones. This “Second Industrial Revolution”, started in 1979, was a “transition to a more sophisticated technological base” which sought to take Singapore “out of competition with lower wage countries and lessening its reliance on labour expansion for economic growth” (Rodan, 1989: 142). Significantly, the new economic direction involved
quantitative restrictions on imported labour to support the state’s new development policy (ibid).

In its early stages, the PAP government attempted to force labour-intensive industries (such as construction and manufacturing, among others) out of their reliance on cheap imported labour by planning to phase out all migrant workers by 1991. The attempt to phase out migrant workers was to spur employers to stop relying on cheap migrant labour and to upgrade their operations through mechanisation, automation and other labour-saving methods (The Straits Times 29-03-1983). However, this move was met with strong opposition by both employers and PAP backbenchers (The Straits Times 15-03-1983; 24-03-1983).

In 1985, faced with strong employer opposition and an acute labour shortage in the construction and manufacturing industries, the government backtracked on its original plan (The Straits Times, 09-03-1985, 22-01-1986, 15-02-1986, 17-02-1986) and, in 1987, implemented a “revolving pool” migrant worker system where the demand for and supply of short-term contract migrants was regulated through the foreign-worker levy and industry quota mechanisms that stipulate the maximum percentage of migrant workers within a firm (The Straits Times, 05-03-1987).

The foreign-worker levy was now formally instituted as a pricing mechanism or an “import tax” in order to dampen the demand for cheap imported labour. This was done so that firms in the construction and manufacturing industries would be spurred on to adopt labour-saving production techniques in order to allow the Singapore economy to “climb the technological ladder” (The Straits Times, 14-10-1984). Despite the use of other forms of political rationale – e.g. to prevent the wage-rates of Singaporean workers from being depressed in the late-80s and early-90s (The Straits Times, 16-03-1988, 02-05-1988, 14-03-1989) – the “productivity” position of the PAP government in justifying levy implementation and hikes appears the most consistent. Productivity concerns were the primary focus within the “second industrial revolution” ethos of capital-intensive production from the late-1970s to 1989 (Rodan, 1989: 142). Through the late 1990s and early-2000s, the government attempted to “upgrade” the construction industry as part of Singapore’s attempt to become a Knowledge-based Economy (Construction 21 Steering Committee, 1999; Low, 2002: 101). In 2010, the government sought to restructure economic recovery after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) through
productivity gains rather than an overall increase in the labour force (Channel NewsAsia, 24-02-2010; Ministry of Manpower, 21-02-2011).

Since its inception as a pricing mechanism in 1987, however, the foreign-worker levy did little to dampen the demand for imported labour within the construction industry. To this end, the government began to incrementally raise the levy, which started out in 1987 at S$200 per worker per month. Between 1989 and 2010, the levy was raised several times, much to the outrage of contractors. In 1994, the levy system was further calibrated. Within the construction sector, contractors paid less for migrant workers brought in under a new Man-Year Entitlement (MYE) quota based on the value of projects awarded to them\(^\text{13}\). Contractors could still hire more migrant workers beyond this MYE levy-bracket (but within the overall industry quota). Construction workers who had worked for more than six years in Singapore were also considered exempt from this MYE-quota. However, contractors would have to pay a much higher levy for what was termed “non-MYE workers” – i.e. workers with less than six years working experience not brought in under MYE quotas allocated to contractors. Under this calibrated system, employers also paid a lower levy rate for semi-skilled and skilled workers under the MYE-tier compared to rates for unskilled migrant labourers (Ministry of Manpower, 2013).

Table 1: Foreign-worker levy rates and industry quotas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Levy (SSGD)</th>
<th>Industry Quota</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>100-430</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>160-470</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>200-450</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>600-2,000</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: The Straits Times, 05-03-1987; Construction 21 Steering Committee, 1999; Ministry of Manpower, 21-02-2011; Ministry of Manpower, 2013)

\(^{13}\) Based on the value of projects awarded to contractors from builders or main-contractors, the labour ministry would calculate the number of “man-years” such a project would require to be completed. A corresponding “Man-Year Entitlement” would then be given by the ministry to the contractor to hire workers on lower levies within this given “entitlement”.

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From Table 1 above, it becomes clear that despite the calibration or tiering of the foreign-worker levy from the late-1990s, contractors have to pay more to hire both unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers. Interestingly, throughout this period, while the levy rates have gone up – in order to spur contractors towards adopting capital-intensive production methods – industry quotas for the construction industry have also been significantly relaxed. The latter could be attributed to the government’s concern that labour-shortages could harm short-to-medium-term economic growth coupled with the reluctance of Singaporeans to take up blue-collar construction jobs. As a result of more than two decades of tweaking levy rates and industry quotas, construction contractors were assured of a larger supply of migrant workers but at a higher cost.

**The Construction Industry in Singapore**

Despite the levy imposed as a disincentive to reliance on labour-intensive methods of production, construction contractors have been generally unconcerned with improving their production techniques. While many on-site work processes in construction can be mechanised – e.g. manual excavation can be replaced by mechanised excavation which significantly consumes less labour-hours than the former – there are several limits to automation. The on-site construction of roads, bridges and buildings as well as various repairs and renovations can be mechanised but cannot be automated.

The pre-fabrication of steel as well as the pre-casting of concrete are two significant avenues of construction activity which can be automated off-site in order to minimise the use of human labour. However, prefab and precast rates in Singapore tend to lag behind other developed countries, such as the United States, Japan and Australia (Construction 21 Steering Committee, 1999: 40-44). As they have not caught up, the lag continues. Precast rates in Singapore between 2001 and 2005 have not shown significant increases – between these periods, precast rates were between 7.0% and 7.9%, with 2005 seeing a significant drop in precast rates to 7.4% (Building and Construction Authority, 2006). Furthermore, steel pre-fabrication and concrete pre-casting in Singapore are done in relatively labour-intensive, open yards rather than in automated manufacturing facilities. The first ever automated precast facility in Singapore was only due to be set up in late-2011 by one of the largest construction firms with the aid of some government funding (Building and Construction Authority, 04-01-2011).
Low precast and prefabrication rates within Singapore’s construction industry can be explained in terms of the general structure of this industry. The industry is generally dominated by small and medium-sized firms with little ability to invest in capital intensive production methods. These firms are more concerned with day-to-day operations within a highly competitive industry (Construction 21 Steering Committee, 1999: ii). According to a construction industry census published in 2000, over half of all construction firms were extremely small and employed less than five workers and over 96% of all firms hired less than a hundred workers. Almost 62% of all firms had an annual turnover of below S$500,000. About half the firms in the industry were sole proprietorships, 34% were private limited companies, 14% were partnerships, while only 1% of all firms were publicly-listed companies or branches of multinational corporations (Construction Industry Development Board, 2000).

An earlier construction industry report in 1999 revealed the links between the nature of the industry and firms’ impetus to innovate production techniques:

The fragmented nature of the industry with its numerous smaller players … does not encourage industry upgrading efforts and economies of scale. Many contractors are constrained by costs, time and expertise to initiate or adopt better techniques and practices. As a result, construction techniques in Singapore are more labour intensive than other countries. (Construction 21 Steering Committee, 1999: ii)

Finally, despite government disincentives in the form of the levy, contractors are still assured of a continued supply of migrant labour by the state. While policy-makers want contractors to innovate production methods, they are still concerned that labour shortages will hurt Singapore’s economic growth. Government attempts to balance short-to-medium-term economic growth with technological innovation have meant that they assure contractors a steady stream of migrant labour despite making migrant workers more expensive for contractors.

**Initial Contractor Responses (1987-1998)**

For these reasons, construction contractors initially responded to the levy, not by innovating production methods, but by attempting to dodge the levy through the employment of “illegal workers” (The Straits Times, 01-10-1988, 13-01-1989, 27-01-1989). These “illegals”, as they were often termed in the Singapore press, were made up of over-stayers, undocumented migrants (“illegal entrants”) and migrants without valid
work passes. Since they were not employed through official government channels, employers would not have to incur a levy for employing them. According to various Straits Times reports, the deployment of “illegals” in construction work reached its peak in the late-1980s and continued to be fairly prevalent well into the 1990s when it seems to have tapered off. At the peak of this phenomenon in the late-1980s, a significant proportion of the migrant labour force in the construction industry was made up of these “illegals” (The Straits Times, 01-10-1988, 02-11-1995).

As the deployment of “illegals” undermined government regulation of the supply of migrant labour (The Straits Times, 01-10-1988, 13-01-1989, 27-01-1989), the government responded swiftly by enacting stricter immigration laws and stepping up enforcement actions (The Straits Times, 13-01-1989, 27-01-1989). In 1989, mandatory caning was introduced for undocumented migrants and over-stayers of more than 90 days. Employers who hire more than five immigration offenders (i.e. undocumented migrants and over-stayers) were also liable to be caned (Low, 2002: 103). Months before mandatory caning came into effect; the government announced an amnesty for “illegals” to surrender themselves to the authorities for immediate deportation without punishment. After this amnesty, huge enforcement operations involving the labour Ministry, immigration authorities and the police were launched to clamp down on the deployment of “illegals” (The Straits Times, 18-03-1989).

However, these measures came at some political and economic cost to the government. When a Thai construction worker was sentenced to be caned for overstaying in 1989 (the first case after the amnesty), a diplomatic row erupted with the Thai military government at that time (The Straits Times, 11-07-1989). The row was defused by Singapore granting a second amnesty for “illegals” which again involved government mass media campaigns and the deportation of over-stayers and undocumented migrants at the expense of the Singapore government (The Straits Times, 27-07-1989). Overall, the government spent a considerable amount of public resources in enforcement operations, prosecution of “illegals” and their employers, and the incarceration and deportation of these “illegals”. In 1989 for instance, “illegals” made up 17% of the total prison population in Singapore and cost S$9.4 million a year to feed and clothe (The Straits Times, 18-03-1989). It is also worth noting that many over-stayers who were caught working illegally from the late-1980s and well into the 1990s were actually abandoned by their employers who had defaulted on levy payments to the state (The
Straits Times, 31-12-1997). Until 1991, it was the state that had to bear the cost of controlling and deporting migrant workers who had been abandoned and left destitute.

**EFMA Regulations**

It was within this context of the rising social and political cost that contract migrant labour was starting to have on the state that the Employment of Foreign Workers Act (later renamed the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act or EFMA) was enacted in 1991. EFMA was a multi-pronged piece of legislation that sought to deal with the issues pertaining to “illegal”, abandoned and destitute workers and their employers. The Act was effectively an attempt by the government to ensure that costs relating to the maintenance and repatriation of migrant workers were borne by employers and not the state. Under EFMA, this was done through the criminalisation of the employment of all migrant workers without valid and relevant work passes and a list of work permit conditions that stipulate the various legal responsibilities of employers of migrant workers (Government of Singapore, 1991). These work permit regulations included conditions stipulating that:

(i) Employers are responsible for the “upkeep and maintenance” of their foreign employees while in Singapore. This makes employers responsible for providing suitable housing, meals and basic medical treatment for their migrant workers.

(ii) Employers are held directly accountable for the repatriation of their foreign employees upon the expiry or cancellation of their work permits.

Additionally, EFMA regulations required employers to take out a S$5,000 “security bond” with the government for every migrant worker employed. According to these regulations, employers are liable to have their bonds forfeited if they are found to have contravened the above stipulations – i.e. not provided for the “upkeep and maintenance” and the repatriation of migrant workers under their charge (ibid).

While a number of provisions under EFMA pertain to the provision of basic welfare for migrant workers, the enactment of EFMA should not be seen as a concession to migrant workers nor should it be understood as an attempt to establish some basic labour or human rights. The EFMA was an attempt by the PAP government to push the social cost of maintaining the migrant workforce onto employers rather than the state. The
migrant labour force has to be maintained in order to remain productive. Someone has to ensure that migrant workers had access to basic provisions such as food, healthcare and housing. Ordinarily, these functions of labour-force maintenance were organised under the state. Contract migrant workers, being cut-off from citizenship rights, are deprived of these benefits by governments (Burawoy, 1976; Sassen-Koob, 1981). Furthermore, temporary migrant workers create additional costs for states – the cost of repatriation. EFMA, therefore, represents the Singapore government’s attempt to ensure that the costs relating to the maintenance and repatriation of a migrant labour force were borne by the employers of migrant workers.

**Cost Pressures and Contractor Perspectives**

From the two preceding sections, we see that contractors were unable to respond to the government’s levy system in a manner desired by policy-makers. In the late-1980s and early-90s, contractors responded to the levy (and its subsequent increments) by levy-dodging through the hiring of “illegals”. However, the introduction of mandatory caning and stiff government enforcement actions meant that the hiring of “illegals” became a less feasible option for contractors. The enactment of EFMA in 1991, as well as further levy hikes from 1998, put further cost pressures on employers within the construction sector – not only did they have to deal with rising government levies from 1998 (see Table 1), they were also made to ensure that their migrant workers were properly housed, fed and, finally, repatriated.

Contractors, for their part, had never seen eye-to-eye with the PAP government on the levy scheme. As early as 1985, the Singapore Contractors Association Ltd (SCAL) had called the levy a “penalty” and lobbied the government to abolish it (Singapore Contractors Association Ltd, 1985: 19). When the levy was first tiered in 1994 to make it cheaper for contractors to hire semi-skilled workers, SCAL lambasted the government for failing to consult them; saying that because 80% of the foreign workforce in the sector was unskilled, a higher levy on unskilled workers would raise construction costs (The Straits Times, 30-11-1994). In August 1998, as tiered levies started to increase, a construction contractor, Koe Hung Tatt, wrote to The Straits Times to voice that many contractors had difficulties with paying the monthly levy on time and protested punitive measures taken by the labour Ministry against late levy payees. Koe suggested that the Ministry put in place a deferred payment scheme or reduce levy rates (The Straits
During the most recent announcement of levy hikes in March 2010, PAP backbenchers and industry groups again expressed concern that it would only lead to increased business costs (Channel NewsAsia, 23-02-2010, 24-02-2010, 25-02-2010).

Contractors I spoke to were more critical of the levy scheme than industry groups and PAP backbenchers (Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012). One contractor labelled the levy system a “government money-making scheme”, suggesting that the government is “collecting in the billions”. The contractor, however, admitted that for his firm, the levy would only become a “financial burden” when clients are late on payments (Interview, 05-01-2012). This resonates with Koe’s 1998 letter to The Straits Times where he argued that contractors have difficulties paying levies on time when clients are slow in releasing payments (The Straits Times, 26-08-1998).

While contractors and industry groups do not usually criticise the EFMA provisions in the manner in which they have criticised the levy hikes, they hardly seem content with it. When the minimum medical insurance coverage stipulated by EFMA was tripled from S$5,000 to S$15,000 which meant insurance premiums paid by employers would go up, Desmond Hill, the deputy general manager of Penta-Ocean Construction, publicly spoke out against this saying it was “not fair to burden so many employers especially when the economy is already tough” (TODAY, 26-09-2009). The corresponding rises in medical insurance premium rates were a “burden” because, as Hill argued, “even a ten per cent increase in premium is a lot when you multiply it by a few hundred workers” (ibid).

The four contractors I spoke to in January 2012 consider the provisions of the EFMA regulations as “an employer’s duty” to provide for the basic needs of their employees. However, many continued to voice concerns about the rising costs and limited availability of dormitories and approved housing. Rent for approved dormitories in 2012 cost between S$190 and S$300 per worker per month which is a significant increase from before 2006, when employers could find workers lodging for under S$100 per month. This increase can be attributed to several factors such as rising utilities rates, government enforcement against unapproved housing coupled with the

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14 That is, overcrowded dormitories and shop-house lots, abandoned factories, steel containers, etc.
inability of purpose-built dormitories to keep up with the increased number of migrant workers being brought in. As with the levy, these contractors felt that EFMA regulations were a “financial burden” on them, but felt that these overall cost pressures do not necessarily cause a firm to go under. At the same time, they felt that it was near-impossible to maintain their profit margins when levies and dormitory costs continue to increase (Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012).

Over the years, industry groups and PAP backbenchers have often argued that cost pressures from the levy and EFMA provisions will be ultimately transferred to consumers through higher prices (Channel NewsAsia, 23-02-2010, 24-02-2010, 25-02-2010). However, the contractors I spoke to felt that they are unable to pass these costs to their clients because their tenders need to be competitive (Interviews with contractors, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012). Due to the competitive environment that they are operating in, contractors are also subject to pressures from builders and the main contractors they work under to reduce their tender prices. For contractors, a “low-paying contract is still better than having no contracts at all” (Interview, 09-01-2012). While contractors may use bank loans and overdrafts to tide themselves over during difficult periods, these options only aid the firm’s cash flow situation and do not ultimately address increasing cost pressures. As one contractor reflected to me, “where can we put these costs?” (ibid).

Contractor Strategies

The most significant manner in which contractors mitigate these cost pressures is by transferring them onto migrant workers in the form of wage pressures – i.e. contractors put pressure on the wage-earnings of migrant workers. Specifically, there is a tendency for employers to transfer the cost of hiring, training and maintaining the labour-power of migrant workers back onto migrant workers themselves in order to recover a portion of these costs. I will now go on to provide examples of how these wage-pressures are manifested in terms of specific employment strategies.

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15 It is interesting to note that while the Integrated Resorts were being built from 2008, migrants working on the Resorts World Sentosa site had to be housed at a disused offshore naval base on the island of Pulau Brani. The acute shortage of housing for migrant workers allowed the Ministry of Manpower to push for the conversion of the old barracks into a dormitory despite initial opposition from the Port of Singapore Authority which occupies and controls access to Pulau Brani.
Salary deductions

One of the most common ways in which contractors mitigate the costs brought about by levy increments and EFMA provisions is through direct deductions from the monthly or fortnightly wages of their workers. These deductions take many forms and include direct deductions for levy, housing, food, utilities, “security deposits”, medical expenses, repatriation costs, and absenteeism (HOME, 2008, 2009; TODAY 11-01-2010). Between April 2007 and March 2008, for instance, local NGO HOME reflected that unauthorised salary deductions were the most common complaints that migrant workers made – 198 incidences out of 532 cases (HOME, 2008). The incidences of salary deductions are likely to be higher because HOME only records deductions that are not authorised under the Employment Act. As such, these 198 cases in 07/08 do not include deductions for housing, food and utilities.

Employers who commit to such deductions often assert that they are “sharing” these costs with workers. The salary slip shown in Figure 1 of the Appendix demonstrates how these deductions are made. The worker in this case has had S$31.17 deducted for “dormitory – gas & power supply” as well as S$18.17 deducted for the provision of a “double cooker” (most likely a stove for the worker to do his cooking with). It is worth noting that dormitory rents cost between S$190 and S$300 per worker every month and gas stoves easily cost more than S$18. It is also worth noting that the workers’ gross fortnightly salary, in this case, only amounts to S$266.66. It becomes impossible for the employer to transfer the entire cost of maintenance onto the worker, so these costs come to be “shared”. A different contractor I spoke to told me that such practices were justified because neither the worker nor the employer, alone, could bear these costs in their entirety (Interview, 05-01-2012).

As almost all contract migrant workers are daily-rated workers (rather than salaried), deductions for absenteeism often serve as an additional penalty. NGO staff I spoke to reflected that, aside from not paying a worker his daily-rated wage for missing work, some employers felt an additional financial penalty is necessary because levy and maintenance costs are still incurred by employers even when workers do not work (Interview with HOME helpdesk staff, 23-12-2011). In such circumstances, employers find it apt to transfer levy and maintenance costs onto workers when they fail to turn up for work.
As such, we see in the salary slip shown in Figure 2 that the worker has had a total of S$100 deducted from his fortnightly wages for missing work on two occasions. These deductions for absenteeism, therefore, like the other deductions mentioned, represent attempts by employers to put the costs of the levy and EFMA provisions onto the earnings of workers, especially when they are not productive.

Deductions for “security deposits” are slightly different. These deductions, shown in Figure 3 as “saving deposit”, involve employers making monthly deductions of between ten and a hundred dollars (again contingent on the workers’ monthly wages) for a pre-determined period of time or when the cumulative deductions reach a pre-determined amount. This “deposit”, usually between one and two thousand dollars, is held by the employer until the end of the worker’s tenure to ensure that the worker does not abscond or contravene the terms of employment. This amount is usually, but not always, refunded to workers at the end of their work tenure. The “security deposit” can be seen as an attempt by employers to transfer the financial risk of hiring a migrant worker onto individual workers. This risk is created by EFMA provisions that make the repatriation of migrant workers the legal obligation of employers – when a migrant worker absconds or when an employer fails to repatriate his migrant worker, the S$5,000 security bond held by the Ministry will be forfeited (Government of Singapore, 1991). “Security deposit” deductions, thus, allow employers to hedge such a risk.

**Withholding of wages**

The withholding, or non-payment, of workers’ wages is another strategy that contractors use to deal with the financial costs and risks brought upon them by the levy system and EFMA provisions. Withholding of wages is sometimes used as a strategy to minimise the potential financial risk in cases of workers absconding or to deter workers from resigning – in much the same way the “security deposit” is used. In 2008, it was reflected in a HOME annual report that certain employers engaged in a practice of withholding workers’ wages by about two to three months which “are used as leverage to prevent the worker from resigning before the end of his contract” (HOME, 2008).

The same report also reflected that a number of unpaid salary cases came about due to employers experiencing financial or cash-flow problems (ibid). The contractors I spoke to reflected that cash-flow problems tend to arise when clients are late with payments (Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012). This makes it
difficult for contractors to fulfil their financial obligations with regard to paying government levies, workers’ dormitory bills and wages. These contractors also reflected that they constantly had to use bank loans and overdraft facilities to tide themselves over during these periods (ibid). While they denied that they personally withheld wages, they tended to emphasise the importance of paying both the levies and dormitory bills on time because of the potential repercussions of not doing so – unpaid levies usually result in the Ministry suspending the work permits of their employees who will become temporarily undeployable; while dormitories could evict their workers, leaving employers with the problem of having to either spend more resources in sourcing for alternative housing or facing punitive measures from the Ministry. As I will explain in the next section, it becomes more feasible for employers to prioritise levy and dormitory payments over the payment of wages.

“Kickbacks”

Kickbacks, like salary deductions, are another strategy that contractors use to ensure some of the costs of hiring, maintaining and repatriating migrant workers are borne by workers themselves. Kickbacks involve employers receiving a cut of workers’ recruitment fees. Migrant workers coming to Singapore pay between two and ten thousand Singapore dollars to their agents in their home countries in return for a job placement. The prospective worker is connected to a prospective employer through several layers of formal and informal labour recruiters who each take a cut of the initial fee. The labour agent who gets to deal directly with a prospective employer offers the latter a kickback – usually about two to three thousand Singapore dollars – as an incentive for hiring the particular worker. This kickback can be pocketed by the employer for personal gain or, as is more commonly thought to be the case, is used by the employer to defray the cost of levies, housing, medical insurance and repatriation (TODAY, 22-04-2008; The Straits Times, 21-06-2008, 06-01-2011).

Kickbacks also come in the form of “contract renewal fees” charged by employers to workers for the renewal of tenure. In these cases, workers are made to pay a sum of one or two thousand dollars in exchange for a work permit renewal. These kickbacks are again used to defray various costs associated with the levy and the maintenance of the migrant workforce (ibid).
A former manager of a medium-sized construction firm of about 200 workers (“Firm X”) revealed to me that while his former company made no deductions to its workers’ wages, it coped with high levy and dormitory rates by receiving kickbacks from labour agents and charging employees S$1,000 for “contract renewal”. My respondent asserted that the money was used to cover the administrative cost of work permit renewal (small or negligible), the renewal of workers’ safety certificates (usually under S$40 per worker) and workers’ work injury insurance premiums (usually under S$100 a year). Upon further questioning, my respondent revealed that the balance can be pocketed by the proprietor as “profit” or “used in any way” to defray business costs (Interview, 10-01-2012).

**Indirect wage pressures**

Contractors also utilise other strategies to pass on cost pressures to migrant workers. The wage pressures outlined in this section are general wage pressures that do not directly transfer the costs of levies, maintenance or repatriation onto workers but are directed at generally lowering the company’s overall wage-bill in order to make general cost savings.

One of these indirect strategies pertains to the depression or stagnation of basic wage rates of migrant workers. There is a notional sense in Singapore that wages for migrant workers in the construction sector are generally low, stagnant or even depressed. According to construction industry surveys done by the government in the 1990s, the *average* daily wage of a scaffolder, steelworker, plasterer and general worker was S$18.45, S$17.00, S$19.12 and S$18.24 respectively in 1992; and S$24.74, S$21.53, S$20.63 and S$17.00 respectively in 1995\(^\text{16}\) (Construction Industry Development Board, 1992: 25, 1995: 61). From 2007 onwards, NGO case-files show that daily basic wages for construction workers generally span between S$16 and S$24 with a good majority of case reports showing wage rates of between S$18 and S$20\(^\text{17}\). While the data available may not make for a proper statistical comparison, it is clear that basic wage rates for migrant workers within the construction industry have not increased

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\(^{16}\) These refer to daily wage rates of migrant workers who, at that time, were almost all Thai, Indian and Bangladeshi.

\(^{17}\) These refer to wage rates of mostly Indian and Bangladeshi workers but also include a few Burmese workers who earn within the same range. Notionally, but not always, construction workers from the PRC tend to have higher wages as they tend to be more skilled than the other migrant workers.
significantly, or may even have said to be lower, taking inflation into account. There may be many reasons for this, but one of them includes the fact that contractors actively attempt to keep their wage bills from escalating by intentionally stagnating basic wages.

The former manager of “Firm X”, for instance, told me that the firm pays its migrant workers a basic rate of S$18 per day. Within the firm, this rate was “non-negotiable” and “part of the deal”. There was no such thing within the firm as increments or raises for workers who were more able, experienced or performed better at work. When probed on the reason for this, the respondent merely reiterated that it was “part of the deal” (Interview, 10-01-2012).

Another contractor provided me with a more descriptive account of basic-wage stagnation within his firm. According to him, his workers often ask him for a dollar or two increment to their basic wage-rates when their tenures are up for renewal. While this contractor claimed that he would have liked to give them the increments, he felt that with the recent hikes in levy rates, he would be unable to maintain his profit margins by raising his workers basic rates (Interview, 09-01-2012).

Other strategies employers use to control their wage bills include the paying of overtime and rest-day wages below statutory standards and the general absence of paid leave benefits for migrant workers. While the Employment Act (which covers almost all blue-collar workers, among others) stipulates that work beyond 40 hours a week is to be paid at 1.5 times and rest-day (usually Sunday) work is to be paid at twice the basic rate of pay (Government of Singapore, 1968), HOME case-files reveal that a number of employers constantly pay their migrant workers below these rates (HOME, 2008, 2009). None of the contractors I spoke to, however, admitted that they practiced this (Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012). While the Employment Act also stipulates paid leave entitlements for workers at different lengths of service (Government of Singapore, 1968), NGOs have reflected that the practice of giving migrant workers these entitlements is almost non-existent. When I asked contractors if they provided their migrant workers with paid leave benefits, they only replied that migrant workers were free to take no-pay home leave and were expected to work whenever they were needed (Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012).
Migrant Worker Powerlessness

Migrant workers potentially face significant obstacles in formally challenging or contesting these contractor strategies for several reasons. Firstly, a number of the salary deductions outlined above are actually authorised under the Employment Act (Government of Singapore, 1968). The Act, first enacted in 1968, authorises employers to make a given list of deductions from workers’ salaries including deductions for housing and rental, utilities and food (ibid). The deductions for “dormitory – gas and power supply” in Figure 1 and “food allowance” in Figure 2 are perfectly legitimate under the Employment Act.

Secondly, and more importantly, migrant workers do not have access to the formal political means of contesting these strategies. While migrant workers in Singapore are free to join trade unions, there are few or no independent trade unions in the country. Historically, the labour movement in Singapore has been largely suppressed and incorporated by the PAP government. From 1956 to 1965, the PAP led by Lee Kuan Yew politically undermined leftist factions within the party to suppress the independent trade union movement through the arrests and detention of significant left-wing union and student leaders and journalists (Rodan, 1989: 59-74). With independence in 1965 and left-wing political elements detained without trial, the PAP-sponsored National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) was used, together with laws that severely curtailed the ability of labour to organise, to corporatise organised labour under the one-party state (ibid: 91-93; Rodan, 2006: 143). This entailed an “increase in labour regulation and discipline” within Singapore society through forms of repressive state labour controls where the “industrial progress” of the country was based on a “tripartite” consensus between the PAP-controlled NTUC, employer and industry groups and the one-party state (Rodan, 1989: 91; Hing, 1997: 86).

While the objectives of the PAP have been viewed differently – Hing (1997) argues that labour is repressed for pro-business reasons, while Rodan (1989, 1996) argues that these controls were primarily to ensure that organised labour did not pose a political threat to the one-party state – the fact of the matter was that organised labour has no longer been a political force in Singapore ever since its repression and subsequent incorporation from the 1960s. Within such politically repressive circumstances, migrant workers are
unable to tap into an independent labour movement to formally contest their exploitation.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers pose major obstacles for workers to resist these wage pressures or even to seek labour justice. The deportability of contract migrant workers in Singapore can be traced back to 1977 when immigration laws were created to make it an offence for migrant workers to remain in Singapore upon the expiry of their work permits (The Straits Times, 28-12-1977). In March 1989, the criminalisation of overstaying became more intense when the PAP government introduced mandatory caning for work permit holders who overstay their visas by more than 90 days (The Straits Times, 11-07-1989). The enactment of EFMA in 1991 gave employers free reign to unilaterally terminate the work permits (and hence employment) of their migrant workers (Government of Singapore, 1991).

The construction of migrant worker deportability in Singapore can be understood as a political mechanism used by the government to ensure that migrant workers are effectively cut-off from citizenship rights and the benefits that these rights bring. This concurs with both Yeoh’s (2006) and Liow’s (2011) argument that migrant worker policies are the tools by which contract migrant workers can be “used and discard(ed)” (Yeoh, 2006: 32) or “disposed” of when no longer needed (Liow, 2011: 14-15). The institution of migrant worker deportability as a tool to restrict access to citizenship and permanent residence was likely to have been motivated by the PAP government’s intention to avoid or minimise what was termed as the “enormous social and economic costs” of having a large migrant labour force (The Straits Times, 06-02-1989). These costs include the social cost of general welfare provisions guaranteed by citizenship (i.e. the social wage) as well as the economic cost of being reliant on labour-intensive and low value-added industries (The Straits Times, 23-03-1982, 14-10-1984, 06-02-1989). The PAP government has been extremely successful in this regard; not only does the state not have to provide for the basic needs of a considerably large (but transient) migrant labour force, the costs of recruiting, training, maintaining and repatriating these workers are transferred to employers while the foreign-worker levy continues to be a consistent source of revenue for the government.
The occupational immobility of migrant workers, instituted by general labour legislation in the 1980s and concretised within EFMA in 1991, is based more on an economic rather than political rationale – the government wanted to tightly control the labour supply of each industry, each particular firm. In 1984, the Ministry of Labour wrote in to the Straits Times, saying:

The ministry cannot allow the foreign worker to be deployed in an occupation other than that specified in the work permit because this would bypass its control on the allocation of foreign workers only to the sector or industry allowed to have such workers. (The Straits Times, 06-08-1984)

The government’s concern with controlling the supply of migrant labour within each particular industry meant that, by 1991, it became illegal for migrant workers to work for anyone other than his or her designated employer, or even to partake in any other form of income generating activities, and for employers to deploy their migrant workers outside the specified industry sector. Migrant workers who are found to contravene work permit conditions set out by EFMA will have their work permits terminated and face deportation (Ministry of Manpower, 2011).

While general labour laws in Singapore do offer migrant workers a minimal level of protection against the contractor strategies outlined earlier, their ability to access labour justice through the Ministry is strongly compromised by their deportability and occupational immobility. A joint report in 2010 by two migrant worker NGOs, HOME and TWC2, describes some of these obstacles. Migrant workers fear losing their jobs as employers have the unilateral right to terminate their permits. Migrant workers are subjected to forced repatriation, physical assault and verbal abuse. They find it difficult (because of their deportability) to enforce labour court orders even when they have been successful with their claims. Employment Act time bars are also prohibitive – workers can only make wage claims for up to one year from the date of lodging the claim and need to make a claim within six months of termination of employment (HOME and TWC2, 2010: 5-10).

Within the workplace, the factors outlined above – the suppressed state of the general labour movement in Singapore, the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers coupled with the legality of some of these strategies – heavily slant the balance of power in favour of employers. It is for these reasons that contractor strategies of using wage pressures are particularly coercive. While government legislation
increases the economic costs of hiring and maintaining the labour power of migrant workers and the cost of repatriating migrant workers onto contractor capital, there is a structural tendency for contractor capital to use wage pressure strategies as a means to transfer part of these costs onto migrant workers. These strategies are only possible because the suppressed state of organised labour and the political powerlessness (deportability and occupational immobility) of migrant workers in Singapore create significant structural obstacles for migrant workers to formally challenge these strategies. It is important to note that the use of wage pressure strategies are only a structural tendency – the extent to which and the specific manner in which this tendency comes to be realised within individual firms are contingent on a range of factors such as the size and economic performance of individual firms. Nonetheless, cost pressures brought upon contractor capital through migrant worker policies do exist and wage pressure strategies represent the most feasible option for contractors in general to deal with these.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the tensions between contractor capital and government policy-makers over two significant aspects of Singapore’s migrant worker policy – the levy system and the legal provisions of EFMA, in order to demonstrate how these aspects of policy create particular labour control tendencies within the construction worksite. The foreign-worker levy first instituted as a pricing mechanism in 1987 represents government attempts to force contractors to adopt more capital-intensive production methods. However, construction contractors, faced with the limited ability to innovate and assured of a continual supply of migrant labour, do not respond in a manner hoped for by the government. Contractors initially responded by levy-dodging through the hiring of illegals, which was strongly clamped down on by government authorities.

The state, which had to bear considerable social and political costs as a result of attempting to re-regularise the migrant labour regime, responded by enacting the EFMA which sought to transfer the cost of maintaining the labour power of and repatriating the migrant labour force onto individual employers. Faced with increased cost pressures from rising levy, dormitory and utilities rates, contractor capital responded by transferring part of these costs onto migrant workers in terms of wage pressure
strategies in order to maintain profit margins. These strategies come in a variety of forms such as direct salary deductions, the withholding or non-payment of wages, kickbacks and the active depression or stagnation of basic wages, among others.

The structural tendency towards contractor adoption of wage pressures is not only brought about by cost pressures from government policies, but also by the political powerlessness of migrant workers. Migrant workers are unable to formally challenge these wage pressures for several reasons. They are unable to tap into independent trade union movements because the labour movement in Singapore has historically been suppressed by and incorporated into the one-party PAP state. Pro-business labour laws also mean that a number of these wage-pressure strategies are legal. Most significantly, the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers prove to be significant obstacles in their search for labour justice. Interestingly, we see that while government policies create cost pressures for contractors, the political regulation of migrant labour, as well as of labour in general, allows contractors an avenue to mitigate these pressures.

The wage pressure strategies of contractor capital, within the context of generally repressed labour conditions and migrant worker powerlessness in Singapore, have significant entailments for the strategies and tactics that migrant workers can use to resist exploitation and to forward their own interests within the production process. After considering the migration objectives of Bangladeshi construction workers in Chapter Three, Chapter Four explores how these employer strategies prove to be a significant source of tension between workers and employers. From Chapters Four to Six, I demonstrate that while the structural confines of migrant worker powerlessness (as well as the constraints of migration projects) limits the ways in which workers can contest and resist contractor strategies, they also engender new forms of struggles within the workplace.
Chapter Three

The Migration Projects of Temporary Bangladeshi Labour Emigrants to Singapore

In this chapter, I examine the material and ideological circumstances under which Bangladeshi contract migrant workers enter the wage-labour relation in Singapore. These are important elements in explaining the nature of their production politics as these circumstances shape the ways in which they engage with and respond to exploitation and labour control. Specifically, I argue that these workers’ objectives of migration – their attempts to accumulate wealth from abroad to improve their families’ life-chances – are threatened by the very circumstances of that migration. This is primarily due to the nature of the recruitment process. At the same time, the considerable social costs of unsuccessful migration – shame, ostracisation and economic strain – also mean that these workers are unlikely to accept being subjected to the wage pressures that characterise Singaporean construction sites. The vulnerability of these “migration projects” and the cost of failure are significant for the nature of production politics because they are a key source of tensions between Bangladeshi migrant workers and their employers within the production process.

In the previous chapter, I have shown that the PAP government seeks to induce contractors into improving production techniques through the levy system and attempts to push costs associated with the maintenance and repatriation of migrant workers onto employers. Contractors, as the employers of migrant workers, in turn, use wage pressures to transfer these costs onto migrant workers. At this point, in order to understand migrant worker responses to these wage pressures within the broader political context of migrant worker powerlessness, it is necessary to outline what contract migrant workers are trying to accomplish when they enter the wage-relation in Singapore.

I conceptualise the circumstances and objectives of temporary labour migration from Bangladesh as a “migration project” that arises out of their families’ position within the class-status configuration of rural Bangladesh. Migration projects (to Singapore, at least) are the means by which families of high status but low material wealth attempt to correct these wealth-status discrepancies and the predicaments they create for them.
within the rural community. Significantly, these projects are also imbued with dominant rural imaginings of *bidesh* (the world-abroad), which places huge social and moral expectations on migrant workers. In addition, the projects are funded by significant levels of personal debt incurred through multi-layered processes of recruitment. Due to factors such as indebtedness, the nature of the recruitment process, social and moral expectations that individual migrants are held to, as well as their occupational immobility in Singapore, Bangladeshi migrant workers depend on stable and extended tenure and a strong earning capacity in order to accomplish their migration projects. However, tenure and earning capacity are both immediately compromised by the tendency towards mitigating wage pressures in the workplace and by the deportability of migrant workers in Singapore.

**Bangladeshi Temporary Labour Migration to Singapore**

Male contract migrant workers on work permits from Bangladesh were first used in the construction and shipbuilding industries in Singapore around the early-to-mid 1990s. According to industry sources, the use of South Asian (Indian and Bangladeshi) and People’s Republic of China (PRC) migrant labour had slowly begun to replace Thai and Malaysian migrant labour as the main source of semi- and unskilled construction labour in Singapore since the late 1990s (Construction Industry Development Board, 1992, 1995, 2000; Interviews with contractors, 04-01-2012, 05-01-2012, 09-01-2012, 10-01-2012).

No clear or fully reliable figures exist on the number of Bangladeshi workers currently in the construction industry or in Singapore as a whole. Statistics on the migrant workforce by nationality is classified information in Singapore, and hence not publicly available. However, the Bangladeshi High Commission in Singapore reports that there are “more than one hundred thousand” Bangladeshis living in Singapore and 90% of them are male migrant workers employed in the construction and shipbuilding industries (Bangladesh High Commission Singapore, 2012). According to the Bangladesh government’s Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), a total of 318,650 Bangladeshi migrant workers have worked in Singapore as of 2010 (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 2009). In the year 2011, BMET reports that 48,666 workers were cleared by Bangladeshi immigration to work in Singapore (Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training, 2012).
While no official numbers are publicly available, Bangladeshis represent one of the three major nationalities, together with workers from India and the PRC, employed as semi- or unskilled labour in the construction sector. The High Commission figure of 90% work permit holders from over 100,000 Bangladeshis living in the country can be compared to various estimates of the number from the PRC – 200,000 in 2010 (Chan, 2011: 11-14) – and India – 90,000 to 100,000 in 2005 (Lal, et. al., 2006: 17). From these estimates, Bangladeshi, Indian and PRC migrant workers make up almost half of Singapore’s total non-resident workforce. Within the construction industry, their presence is even more pronounced given that, notionally speaking, these three nationalities make up almost all of the semi- and unskilled construction labour in the country. It is in this sense that the presence of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore is significant.

**Class-status configurations in Rural Bangladesh and the Problems of Modhom Lok**

Temporary labour migration from Bangladesh is known to be a “predominantly rural phenomenon” (Rahman, 2009: 53). A survey conducted by Rahman (ibid) among Bangladeshi workers in Singapore showed that just over 84% were of rural origin. All but two of my respondents came from rural areas in Bangladesh. Temporary labour migrants from Bangladesh usually come from non-poor families which are financially solvent as it is usually these families who are able to afford hefty recruitment fees or secure large loans required for migration. This is especially the case for migration to Singapore which usually costs more than securing employment in countries such as Malaysia and a number of Middle Eastern countries.

Bangladeshis migrating to Singapore are often referred to as Singapuri (or Shingapuri) migrants. My interview sample of 45 confirmed that Singapuri migrant workers tend to

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18 The number of PRC workers seems to be considerably larger as semi- and unskilled PRC workers are also allowed to work in the service and manufacturing sectors in addition to the construction and shipbuilding sectors, while South Asian migrant labour is restricted to the latter two sectors.

19 Literally “middle people”.

20 The sample size and date of this survey were not clearly stated in Rahman (2009: 53). However, it is likely that it was conducted between 1999 and 2004.

21 This is largely true for male labour migration. Female temporary labour migrants, on the other hand, tend to come from poorer families (see Afsar, 2009: 8).

22 Interestingly, during my last visit to Bangladesh in April 2012, I was told by some of my respondents that the cost of going to Saudi Arabia had started to outstrip the cost of temporary migration to Singapore.
be overwhelmingly rural middle-class folk. They usually come from families of “titled” (i.e. “high” or highly esteemed) lineages which indicate that, some generations ago, their forebears were wealthy and influential people within their respective communities. Many of my respondents also indicated that they remember their grandfathers being relatively wealthy and influential in their communities. Delwar, for instance, recalls how his late grandfather, head of the well-respected Mollah Bari, commanded the respect of everyone in the village and was often approached to mediate personal and inter-clan disputes within the village (Interview, 20-04-2012).

Today, for a range of reasons including land loss through bank erosion in flood-prone areas, failed business ventures and segmentation of landholding due to inheritance, their families control fairly small amounts of land. All but three of my respondents reported that their families own and control between 20 and 300 decimals\(^{23}\) of land. One of these came from a poor landless family while the other two respondents were from relatively wealthier families who control in excess of 300 decimals of land. It is worth noting that all but two of my respondents do not have any family members directly involved in cultivating land – their smallholdings are usually cultivated by sharecroppers. One respondent reported that, prior to migration, he and his father had cultivated the 45 decimals of land they owned. The only landless respondent in my sample reported that he was working as a sharecropper before coming to Singapore. In addition to small landholding, about half my respondents reported that their immediate male family members (such as fathers and brothers) are/have been involved in small business enterprises (e.g. tailoring, shopkeeping, small commodity trading) or have been employed in white-collar or traditional middle-class professions such as schoolmasters, doctors, bank staff and military officers. While their families are no longer wealthy, they still have a relatively high social status within the village community and are still held in high esteem.

*Modhom lok*, literally meaning “middle people”, is the term that I choose to use to describe the socio-economic background of these *Singapuri* migrant workers as opposed to commonly used class-status terms in Bangladesh such as *boro lok* (“big people” of wealth and status), *choto lok* (“small people” of low wealth and status), *dhoni lok* (rich people) and *ghorib lok* (poor people). When I asked my respondents to

\(^{23}\) 100 decimals = 1 Acre. 1 Hectare = 2.47 acres.
describe their families’ socio-economic background within this discursive frame, most of them responded with what they were not – “no[t] ghori but no[t] dhoni” or “no[t] boro, no[t] choto”. Some respondents suggested that terms such as modhobishto or modhom lok (both mean “middle people”) would be more apt to describe them as they neither have the resources (money, land, political connections) that rich people have, nor do they find themselves struggling for subsistence like the poor. Hence, neither boroldhoni, nor chotolghorib could be used to describe their family backgrounds. During fieldwork in Sirajganj and Comila, I observed that their peers in the village often refer to them as “rich” or “big” people, often by virtue of their lineage as well as the fact of them having worked abroad. While the term modhom lok is not commonly used in local discourse, almost all my respondents felt that this would be the most accurate term to describe their socio-economic background. The one landless respondent is the only exception within my sample as he clearly counts himself among the poor.

Class-status configurations in rural Bangladesh

The class-status configuration – i.e. the social relationship between material wealth and social status – in rural Bangladesh is very important because the objectives of migration arise out of the circumstances faced by modhom men within this configuration. Within these configurations, the status – or more specifically the respectability (shonman) and honour (izzat24) – of a family or the bari (a blood-related kin-group sharing a common courtyard) is contingent on how members conform to particular social norms, which are often gendered in nature. For instance, male heads of households are expected to economically provide for their family and maintain the privacy of their family’s women folk (Bertocci, 1972: 44; Jahangir, 1979: 86). As scholars on Bangladesh have frequently pointed out, material wealth is intimately tied to social status (Bertocci, 1972; Jahangir, 1979; Rozario, 1992; White, 1992; Wood, 1994; Gardner, 1995), and even mutually reinforcing (Wood, 1994: 80). A wealthy family is more likely to be able to mobilise resources necessary for the upkeep or elevation of a family’s or kin-group’s shonman and izzat. A wealthy male household head, for instance, will be looked up to as he can provide a comfortable living standard for his family. He is able to send his sons for further education, which further raises the social standing of the family or kin-group. He is able to build a private pond (or more recently private bathrooms), for his

24 Bertocci (1972: 44) mentions that the concept of izzat is a manifestation of Weber’s conception of status-honour “par excellence”.
womenfolk to bathe in\textsuperscript{25}, and a separate room to entertain visitors and guests. These ensure that his womenfolk are kept out of the public gaze, hence ensuring their privacy. A poor man, on the other hand, would proverbially have to put his family’s stomach before their honour as his wife would need to work in the homes of the rich to supplement the family income (see: Bertocci, 1972: 44 and Jahangir, 1979: 86). Actions that conform to these gendered norms tend to bring honour and respect to the families of those involved, elevating the status of the family, while actions that go against the grain of these norms tend to bring shame (lojja), with a negative effect upon the family’s status.

There are also social restrictions (albeit never absolute) on the types of occupations that male and female members of high-status families may engage in. It is generally considered socially inappropriate for individuals from high-status families to engage in “low” forms of work characteristic of choto (“small”) or ghorib (“poor”) people (Gardner, 1995: 138-140) or simply work which is not “consistent with family or bari prestige” (Rahman, 2009: 70). For instance, Gardner (ibid) points out that it is only choto or ghorib people who conduct tasks such as “earth cutting”\textsuperscript{26} or who work for another lineage or kin group. Many of my respondents, for instance, said that neither they nor their family members directly cultivated the little land they owned, either because they felt that the tasks involved were beneath their lineage-status, or because they aspired to be seen to do more “high” status work. A person of high-status engaging in “low” work, such as driving a rickshaw or doing menial work for another lineage group, does not entail downward social mobility nor does it change an individual’s or his/her bari’s hereditary status. Rather, through such actions, an individual would bring shame to his/her family and bari (Gardner, 1995: 139). Shame erodes or stains the honour of a family, bari or even a lineage group (gushti) (ibid). This would undermine the social worth of an individual or their families as such worth is contingent on the individual’s ability to maintain the honour (izzat) of his/her family (Jahangir, 1979: 86-87). This particular interplay between the honour-shame nexus and economic activity means that particular status-groups encounter social restrictions when it comes to

\textsuperscript{25} During my stay in Sirajganj and Comila and even during my earlier visit to Bangladesh in 2007, I noticed that many men usually bathe in public ponds.

\textsuperscript{26} Here, Gardner is referring to the task of shifting soil or manual excavation, something Singapuri migrant workers refer to as maati-cutting (lit. cutting up earth or soil); a task they are often deployed to do when working in the Singaporean construction site.
earning a living. At the same time, the livelihood aspirations of particular status-groups are shaped according to the honour-shame nexus.

The problems of being modhom

Modhom families are held to high-status expectations within their local communities as they are often referred to as borro lok (people of high wealth and status). However, they have little wealth and little ability to accumulate wealth in order to live up to the implicit social expectations within the class-status configuration. Many of my respondents lived in homes that contain the status symbols of the 1970s and 1980s – behind their homes are private ponds, hidden from the roads, for their womenfolk to bathe; the roofs of their homes are often made of tin or galvanized iron; they often have separate rooms for entertaining guests where, according to Bertocci (1972), high-status families were able to “maintain the ‘privacy’ of [their] women and to entertain guests in a manner consistent with both the norms of purdah27 as well as of genteel hospitality” (ibid: 44). What these families did not (and quite a number still do not) have were the more contemporary status symbols – private motor vehicles, brick (or pucca) homes and attached bathrooms – which can be found in the homes of dhoni lok (“the rich”), including a number of those who have worked abroad.

The “economic base” of their high-status is no longer in place as small landholdings alone do not generate sufficient wealth to make one dhoni. Besides small-scale landlordism/landholding, modhom people actively seek other forms of bhalo kaz (lit. “good” work, or work compatible with family prestige) or “respectable professions”28. Locally, “respectable professions” for these males come in the form of either reputable business enterprises or white-collar employment29. The “reputability” of a business enterprise depends on whether the type and size of business is consistent with the social status of the individual’s family. Some of my respondents have pointed out that trading in cloth or garments is considered more reputable than trading in molasses, for instance (Interview, 19-04-2012). The location where business is conducted also plays a part in

27 That is, the social conventions of the veiling of women.

28 Bhalo Kaz is a term consistently used in the literature on Bangladeshi labour emigration (e.g. Gardner 1995; Rahman, 2009) and also consistently used by my respondents. Additionally, a good proportion of my respondents also used English terms such as “good job” and “respectable profession” interchangeably with “bhalo kaz”.

29 White-collar employment is often referred to as “service” or “chakri” in Bengali which is distinguished from normal (usually blue-collar or menial) “work” which is referred to as “kaam” or “kaaz”.
determining the “reputability” or respectability of a business. Before deciding to migrate to Singapore, Rasel Bhuiyan (“Bhuiyan” being the family “title”) told me that he had plans to open a small provisions shop in his local village market (which is frequently teeming with activity as it is along the Dhaka-Chittagong highway). However, he was told by some of his uncles and village elders that he should not do so. Rasel said,

...they tell me Bhuiyan [referring to his grandfather] grandson cannot do like this. Open shop must go big city and open, cannot open shop in the small village market. (Interview, 11-11-2010)

For Rasel, his intention to run a small shop in the “small” village market was seen by his relatives and village elders as being beneath the Bhuiyan family prestige. Unfortunately for Rasel, he lacked the necessary financial capital and business connections to start a larger shop in Dhaka City or even in a nearby town.

Starting a profitable business endeavour that is compatible with family prestige can be a rather tricky matter for modhom people in rural Bangladesh. Almost all my respondents indicated that they had or still aspire to start a “big” (i.e. highly profitable) business endeavour in Bangladesh but found great difficulty in raising capital or securing credit. My respondents indicated that one would need between 500,000 to 900,000 BDT (6,000 to 11,000 US Dollars) to start such a business endeavour, usually in partnership with a few friends or relatives. However, friends, families and money-lenders tend to be reluctant to lend for business as such endeavours are generally considered risky. This points to the other down-side of doing business: due to the limited capacity of the Bangladesh state to provide basic law and order, particularly in the areas of policing and the judicial system (Sarker, 2004: 327); it becomes rather risky to maintain a profitable business without the support of local political connections. One of my respondents, Sohail, sums up the problems modhom men face when attempting to start business ventures, a view shared by all my respondents:
This is Bangladesh, not like Singapore where if anybody don’t pay you, you can go to government and complain. In Bangladesh, you cannot do anything. Last time my father have the garments business, he supply the cotton and the dye to people. One day one man take the consignment but never give the money, then he run away. And then my father business have to close. So now, you tell me if anybody don’t pay you, then you complain to who? If you go to police station the policeman tell you, ‘you give me money then I open the case!’ Ah! You see? How to do business? (Interview, 09-11-2010)

The civil service, and law enforcement in particular, in Bangladesh is often seen by its citizens to be “inefficient, ineffective, non-transparent, unaccountable and ... non-responsive to societal demands” (Kim and Monem, 2008: 13), and in the absence of political connections, “reputable” business endeavours can be rather risky. Political patronage, on the other hand, has to be bought, something modhom people cannot afford. Sohail’s family, for instance, was unable to bribe police officials to look into the case of a client making-off with a consignment. It is for this reason that lenders, whether relatives or usurers, are reluctant to extend credit for such endeavours.

White-collar employment, while highly desirable according to my respondents, is even further out of reach for many modhom people mainly because of the extremely high rate of graduate unemployment in Bangladesh. Since the 1980s, it has been argued that there has been a “structural imbalance” between the number of white-collar jobs created and the number of university graduates produced (Islam, 1980: 47; also see: Rahman, 2007). Between 1989 and 1996, for instance, secondary and post-secondary unemployment rates rose from 3.7% to 10.3% while graduate unemployment rose from 3.9% to 9.2% (Afsar, et. al., 2002: 58). Yet, one does not need recourse to published statistics to understand the problem of white-collar unemployment to these modhom men. While some of their fathers and uncles have been gainfully employed in these jobs, they see their brothers, cousins and peers with even higher qualifications unable to find any work for years. A few migrant workers I interviewed told me that they have few regrets about not continuing their education beyond high school after looking at the position their university-educated friends and family members are in. Moreover, almost half of my respondents indicated that they were unable to continue with post-secondary education either due to their poor grades or their families’ being unable to afford to send every child to university. About ten of my respondents also indicated that their remittances were being used to fund the university education of their younger siblings.
While “respectable professions” may be closed-off to many modhom men today, their subsistence is not immediately problematic because of the small landholdings or businesses they still control. All but one of my landed respondents indicated that, prior to migration, family subsistence was not a major concern. One landed respondent reflected that family subsistence was a problem because proceeds from sharecropping their small landholding of 40 decimals did not provide for his entire family and that they lacked any other source of income. The one landless respondent reflected that the amount of sharecropping he had taken on before migrating was sufficient to maintain his wife, his child and himself. The fact that many modhom people rarely encounter immediate problems with basic sustenance is another reason why, in addition to shame, they are not prepared to engage in subsistence wage-work locally. On the one hand, modhom families are “stuck” with small landholdings with little ability to accumulate wealth to preserve or enhance their social status. On the other hand, their relatively high social status means that modhom men either feel restricted in doing work incompatible with their family’s’ status or have few aspirations to do “low” forms of work. Moreover, their economic solvency usually means that they do not face an urgent need to work for subsistence wages.

Obstacles modhom people face in accumulating wealth and their reluctance and non-need to go into local subsistence wage-work mean that many young men from such families are left with, what my respondents describe as, “nothing to do”. The experience of “nothing to do” is never spoken of in positive terms. My respondents see this as a process of social stagnation, a process of frustration with not being able to do anything to improve the well-being of their parents, wives and siblings and the life-chances of their children. The prospect of going to bidesh, however, offers them a concrete opportunity to realise these aspirations, which have often been frustrated by their lack of wealth. Almost all my respondents reflected that before they migrated, they saw bidesh as a place of great wealth, where anyone who goes will return a rich man (dhoni lok). This vision of bidesh – often gained when witnessing the apparent “success” of return migrants before them – reflects more than just an actual economic opportunity. The myth of bidesh as a land of wealth allows modhom men to aspire for more than what they currently have and allows them to believe that a different way of living in society is possible.
For my respondents, thus, going to *bidesh* came to be the solution to the problem of “nothing to do”. It allowed them to aspire to be *boro lok* and provided a way for their aspirations to be realised. Most significantly, because most of my respondents came from highly esteemed families, they had little trouble securing huge loans from relatives, friends and even local moneylenders. On this matter, Rubel Hassan echoed a widely acknowledged fact in Bangladesh,

> If you ask anybody ‘eh lend me one lakh taka, I want to do business’, he will tell you to get lost. But if you say ‘eh lend me five lakh taka, I want to go *bidesh*’, he will surely lend you. Even after you go *bidesh* and lose money and ask for another three lakhs, he will lend you again! (Interview, 02-01-2012)

**Migration projects**

In this sense, temporary labour migration to Singapore can be seen as a *project* (Sartre, 1963; Ortner, 2003) to address the problems of being *modhom*. Following Sartre and Ortner, the project of temporary labour migration arises out of the material and ideological conditions presented by the class-status configurations in Bangladesh. Migration projects represent the agency of *modhom* men, and their families, in addressing or correcting the problem of “nothing to do”.

Going abroad is seen as an “investment” which would bring an individual great wealth with which he could “make a life” for both his natal and future family. “Making a life” - a term often used by my respondents in reference to their motivations for migration – is the objective of the migration project. It essentially involves the migrant using wealth earned from abroad to elevate the status honour of his family through the provision of material comforts and better social, political and economic opportunities in life for himself and his family members. The accumulation of wealth from *bidesh* is meant to: provide families with a more generous daily consumption budget; finance the construction and acquisition of brick homes, attached bathrooms and motor vehicles to elevate or maintain the social prestige of the family or *bari*; allow wives, children and parents access to costly private health, which is perceived to be of a better standard; improve social (including marriage), economic and (possibly even) political prospects, including those of younger siblings and children through financing their education, marriage, business ventures or even the labour migration of brothers.

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30 One *lakh* refers to 100,000.
Furthermore, migrants seek to use wealth earned from *bidesh* to produce further wealth in Bangladesh – savings from abroad can be used to kick-start or rejuvenate the family’s ability to accumulate further wealth and status. My respondents aspire to start lucrative business ventures such as hand-loom workshops, garments trading, pharmacies/dispensaries, commercial potato farms, supplying construction materials, etc. with their savings. This would allow them to “double-up” or “make the *bari* bigger”, to increase the wealth and prestige of their family and their kin-group. For most of my respondents, the establishment of a profitable business venture after uplifting their family’s initial standard of living would be the moment when they feel they can be aptly termed *boro lok* or people of great wealth and status – the final apex, so to speak, of “making a life”.

These are therefore the “objects” that Bangladeshi migrant workers are “trying to bring into being” (Sartre, 1963: 91) through their migration projects. The objectives of these projects, however, are significantly tempered by the social and moral expectations of migration in Bangladesh as well as the nature of the recruitment process, which can undermine the success of the project and raise the stakes of failure. The rest of the chapter elucidates these factors and considers their implications for the nature of production politics in the Singaporean workplace.

**Social and Moral Expectations of Migration: Rural Images of *Bidesh***

In her study of Bangladeshi temporary male labour migration to Malaysia, Dannecker (2009) shows that in rural Bangladesh, *bidesh* is painted as a place full of economic opportunity that is politically stable and secure. Such images are reproduced by return migrants themselves, who rarely speak of their troubles abroad as only success stories will enhance the status and prestige of themselves and their families (ibid: 13-16). These images not only create a distorted or misleading picture of the world abroad, but create socio-moral expectations that all return migrants must be wealthy.

The findings from my fieldwork in Sirajganj and Comila support this view – I observed that return migrants often reproduce “wealthy” appearances of themselves even though they are not as this raises their respectability (*shonman*) within the local community. In April 2012, I followed one of my respondents, Delwar, back to his village after a two-year work stint in Singapore (he had worked for a total of nine years in Singapore). In the first week of his return, Delwar went about the village meeting and greeting his kin,
friends and acquaintances, both rich and poor. He told me that he feels an obligation to do this as he does not want people to think that just because he has become “rich” (having known him for more than five years, I was aware that he is not), he is ignoring the folks in his place of birth (Interview, 20-04-2012). Despite not having made enough money to start a business or even renovate his family home, Delwar returns with many gifts, not just for his family members, but also for his friends – shirts, shaving gel, deodorant, etc. He goes about distributing packets of duty-free cigarettes to his close male friends and offers single sticks of bideshi (foreign) cigarettes to distant acquaintances. He buys everyone tea at the tea-shops and even hosted a small feast for 50 people at his residence. He tells everyone he meets exotic stories about Singapore – he talks of the transport system, the various cultural peculiarities of Singaporean people, the various ethnic groups in Singapore, etc. He does not mention the conditions of his work nor does he openly talk about the work problems faced by contract migrant workers in Singapore, not in public at least. With respect to his actual economic circumstances on return, he feels that no one would believe him, that people will think he had spent his money on drinking, women or gambling, or that he was simply incompetent in his work and was just making up excuses for his failure (Interview, 20-04-2012).

Since Delwar speaks little of his problems, everyone assumes he is “rich”. Only his immediate family members (his parents and three sisters) know about his actual situation. He often repeated to me that only a return migrant’s family would know that he has no money while everyone else assumes he is rich (Interview, 20-04-2012). During his five stints spanning over nine years in Singapore, he had earned enough to repay all his debts (mostly to his older sister’s husband) and support his parents and two younger unmarried sisters, but not enough to invest in a reputable business venture. (He had been planning to buy a few power looms to produce loongis/sarongs and saris). Nonetheless, poor people in the village have approached him and his parents for money. He gave two thousand taka (US$25) to an old friend who was struggling to make ends meet. His mother also gave a similar amount to a poor family when they asked. On why he did so, Delwar simply said, “[If I] No give, so people think my heart no good.” (Interview, 20-04-2012)

From this account, we can see that Delwar tailors his return-narrative in line with societal expectations of migration that all return migrants are rich; and in doing so,
reproduces the image of bidesh as the lands of assured wealth. For the sake of his bari’s prestige and his future social (e.g. marriage) and economic prospects (e.g. potential business partnerships), he feels that he cannot appear to be unsuccessful as this would call his individual self-worth into question. Failure is always explained in terms of individual migrants’ moral impropriety – they spent their earnings on women, gambling and drink – and incompetence – the migrant was poor at his work and hence was prematurely repatriated – or experienced plain bad luck; often in that particular order.

When I followed another return migrant from Sirajganj, Hasan, to his in-laws’ village, he introduced me to an acquaintance who had worked in Singapore for two years. After the acquaintance had left, Hasan tells me that he is a “useless man” as not only did he fail to make any money abroad, he barely returned the loan he took and came back with only a carton of duty-free cigarettes. What is surprising about this statement from Hasan, is that his personal experiences in Singapore made him aware of the issues facing migrant workers in the country. I suggested to Hasan that his acquaintance could have been poorly paid or subject to considerable salary deductions as Hasan, himself, would be well aware of. Hasan simply replied that while this could have well been the case, it is not what people in the village believe (Interview, 18-04-2012).

It would, of course, be untrue to assert that migrant workers do not talk about the issues they face in Singapore at all. Many villagers I met in both Sirajganj and Comila were aware of the types of jobs performed by these migrant workers in Singapore even though three of my interviewees reported that they did not disclose their exact occupation to their family members. Return migrants from Singapore do share stories of employment-related problems with their brothers, cousin-brothers and close friends who are often Singapuri migrants themselves. However, as some of my key respondents pointed out, prospective migrants from their respective families or villages either refuse to believe them or are insistent on taking the risk. While I was staying at Hasan’s house in Sirajganj, his 19 year old cousin-brother, who was studying for a Bachelor of Commerce degree at a local university, approached me and asked me to “bring” him to Singapore for work. I was mildly surprised by this and asked Hasan why he hadn’t told his cousin of the problems faced by migrant workers in Singapore. Hasan replied with a look of resignation on his face, “Tell ‘ready. So many times tell him don’t go Singapore. He don’t believe.” Furthermore, several Bangladeshi NGOs concerned with the welfare of return migrants had indicated to me that they often encounter difficulties
in their outreach programmes to warn potential migrants of the “dangers” of working overseas as the latter are often not interested to find out these “facts” (Various Interviews, 11-04-2012, 24-04-2012, 02-05-2012).

The stubborn prevalence of phantasmic images of *bidesh* can be explained in relation to the material circumstances of rural Bangladesh. In her study of Bangladeshi migration from Sylhet to the UK and the Middle East, Katy Gardner (1995: 35-64) shows that the material wealth gained by successful migrants have contributed towards “the near mythological status of *bidesh*” to the point that villagers who are even aware of the dangers of fraud and migration failure are often willing to entrust labour recruiters with huge sums of money (1995: 62). Gardner argues that the perpetuation of these myths of *bidesh* have as much to do with material conditions in Bangladesh as with the actual benefits of migration since the wealth to be found in *bidesh* is a “metaphor for the scarcity in the *desh* [i.e. Bangladesh]” (1995: 63). As I have shown in the preceding sections, the prospect of going to *bidesh* remains the only avenue available to many *modhom* young men seeking to “make a life”. Telling them to reconsider going because of potential dangers and pitfalls is akin to telling them that they have no prospects of improving their lot, no prospect of addressing this “scarcity in [their] *desh*” (ibid).

During a small gathering of young men in Rasel’s village in Comila, I was introduced to Monir who had just paid S$9,000 for a one-year work permit to work in a Singaporean construction firm. When I sought to warn Monir of the potential problems he could face in the sphere of employment, the other men (a few of whom were return migrants) stopped me. They explained that it was not appropriate for me to caution Monir after he had paid up the recruitment fees, as it would seem that I do not wish him well. Some of my other respondents such as Delwar, Hasan and Rasel told me that they have long stopped warning their eager friends and cousins about the potential problems migrant workers could face in Singapore since their cautionary tales were often met with resentment, their concern being misinterpreted as jealousy (Various Interviews, 11-04-2012; 24-04-2012; 26-04-2012). While Delwar personally indicated a strong desire to change the perception his fellow villagers hold for *bidesh*, he also felt that challenging these perceptions would undermine his social worth within the community; something he was not willing to compromise. It is for such reasons, as well as the compulsion that return migrants face to narrate/enact migration success, that such images of *bidesh*
remain strong within rural Bangladesh and place great social and moral expectations on return migrants.

The Recruitment Process

The multi-layered process of recruitment and the huge financial cost undertaken by migrants and their families as a result, significantly shape the nature of the migration project. While, prevalent rural images of *bidesh* place socio-moral expectations upon migrants, the recruitment process represents the means by which these men access employment in order to pursue the objectives of the project.

*A brief outline of the recruitment process*

A prospective migrant from Bangladesh seeking to work in Singapore will first seek a *dalaal* (unlicensed labour recruiter) through his own personal networks as he would not have contacts to licensed employment agents in Bangladesh (almost always based in Dhaka district) let alone those in Singapore. The village *dalaal* is often a family member of an existing migrant worker in Singapore who has established good enough relations with his own or other employers in Singapore in order to assist them in recruiting workers. It is this particular sub-agent based in Singapore who will inform his Bangladeshi counterpart of any available job vacancies in Singapore. The village *dalaal* tells the prospective migrant that a job has been found for the latter and proceeds to fax the migrant’s passport to Singapore for the application of an In-Principle-Approval (referred to as IPA, for the employment of a migrant worker) through a licensed employment agent in Singapore (who is often Singaporean). The *dalaal* also collects a down-payment from the migrant, part of which is used to pay a licensed employment agent in Bangladesh who would apply for the migrant’s emigration clearance with the Bangladesh government. Once the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore has given an IPA to the prospective employer, the village *dalaal* requests the remaining recruitment fees from the prospective migrant and arranges for his flight to Singapore where he is picked up, either by representatives of his company or the sub-agent in Singapore who arranged his employment. The village *dalaal* gives his Singaporean counterpart a cut of the recruitment fees and the latter pays a kickback to the employer, either as an incentive for hiring and/or to allow the employer to defray the cost of hiring, training

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31 I use the terms “*dalaal*” and “sub-agent” interchangeably to refer to informal unlicensed labour recruiters.
and maintaining the labour-power of the migrant worker (Al Jazeera English, 19-08-2009; Interview with AKM Mohsin, MISAF co-Founder, 11-04-2012).

Frequently, prospective migrants are recruited through training centres – a village *dalaal* may enrol the prospective migrant in a nearby training centre or one in Dhaka district and arrange his employment after he has passed the skills certification test (which makes him a semi-skilled worker). However, more often than not, training centres are run by these village *dalaals* themselves, many of whom are return migrants from Singapore. These training centre *dalaals* often have strong contacts with licensed employment agents in Dhaka as well as unlicensed sub-agents, licensed recruiters and employers in Singapore (Al Jazeera English, 19-08-2009; Interview with AKM Mohsin, MISAF co-Founder, 11-04-2012).

Oftentimes, there are several layers of village *dalaals* in Bangladesh, as well as sub-agents in Singapore, all of whom take a cut of the recruitment fees paid by the prospective migrant. The recruitment fees – usually between S$6,000 and S$10,000 for first-timers\(^\text{32}\) – coughed up by the prospective migrant goes a long way in ensuring that the various layers of *dalaals* and sub-agents, licensed recruiters (both in Singapore and Bangladesh), as well as employers, get a healthy cut. The money rarely, if ever, moves across borders – recruitment fees collected in Bangladesh are usually moved to Singapore through a parallel banking system known as the *hundi* system where *hundi* men, often linked to *dalaals* or who are *dalaals* themselves, situated in Bangladesh and Singapore make contra payments on paper among themselves. The *hundi* based in Singapore collects remittances from workers which are paid-off in Bangladesh to the migrants’ families by his Bangladeshi compatriot. The latter collects recruitment fees in Bangladesh which are paid-off to the various sub-agents and employers in Singapore by the *hundi* based there. The manner in which money “moves” without actually crossing borders is significant as transactions cannot be officially documented, making it difficult for migrants seeking redress for fraud and misrepresentation to provide evidence for formal claims against recruiters and sub-agents (Al Jazeera English, 19-08-2009; Interview with AKM Mohsin, MISAF co-Founder, 11-04-2012; Interview with

\(^\text{32}\) Repeat migrants tend to pay S$1,000 to S$4,000 to secure a one-year contract in Singapore. This could be due to two reasons. Firstly, the cost of training the worker in a Bangladeshi training centre is not incurred after the workers’ first stint. Secondly, a repeat migrant would be able to establish closer contacts with sub-agents in Singapore, which would eliminate one or two layers of sub-agents and *dalaals*, significantly reducing the cost of repeat migration.
Saiful Haque, WARBE Founder, 26-04-2012). Most significantly, the *dalaal* system of recruitment essentially means that migrant workers have little or no control over who they are employed by.

Migrant workers find several ways of funding such an expensive migration project and often from more than one source. Among my respondents, the most common source of funding is an interest-free loan from close friends and relatives such as maternal and paternal uncles, cousin-brothers, in-laws, sisters’ husbands and sometimes even brothers; some of whom could be migrant workers themselves (38 out of 45 cases). These loans, while almost always informal, are different from using the savings of immediate family members, such as fathers (8 cases) as they need to be paid back. While unpaid debts to close relatives can easily be written-off, it generally does not reflect well on the individual worth of migrants within and beyond the immediate kin-group. Migration projects are also funded by loans from local moneylenders that incur varying rates of monthly interests – about 12 of my respondents reported that they had borrowed some money on interest, while two of the 12 indicated that such loans were their only source of finance. Additionally, ten of my respondents indicated that their families had sold some land or farm animals to help them raise the recruitment fees. As we will see in the later sections, the economic standing of a migrant’s family before and during migration, as well as the manner in which money was raised, are important factors that determine how vulnerable migrants’ families are when migration does not succeed.

*Powerlessness in recruitment*

Local political economy factors ensure that migrant workers are unable to affect the recruitment process – one that weighs heavily in favour of recruiters and can often materially undermine the objectives of migration. There is a lack of legal protection for labour emigrants within Bangladesh. Siddiqui (2006: 75) argues that the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE), which is charged with looking into the welfare of Bangladeshi overseas migrant workers, “severely suffers from a lack of resources” and there are significant problems in governing temporary labour migration in the country. Return migrants have no real legal recourse in Bangladesh when their sub-agents make false promises regarding wages and working conditions or when they have been repatriated prematurely. While there are some NGOs
in Bangladesh such as Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a legal aid and human rights organisation, and WARBE (Welfare Association of Repatriated Bangladeshi Employees) and MISAF (Migrant Sanctuary Foundation Bangladesh), dedicated to the welfare of return migrants, which do assist return migrants with litigation claims and local-level dispute resolution, the success of these schemes are often undermined by the absence of documentary evidence as migrant workers rarely, if ever, receive payment receipts from *dalaals*. The efforts by migrant worker NGOs to push the Bangladeshi government to enhance regulation of the recruitment industry often hit a brick wall (Interview with AKM Mohsin, MISAF co-Founder, 11-04-2012; Interview with Saiful Haque, WARBE Founder, 26-04-2012).

The inability of successive Bangladeshi governments to ensure legal protection for migrant workers in recruitment can be owed to the fact that the licensed labour recruiters association – Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) – is a strong political lobby. Many BAIRA members are elected Members of Parliament who sit on various inter-ministerial committees and the parliamentary standing committee on labour migration (Siddiqui, 2006: 76). This effectively gives BAIRA the power to block any form of proposed legislation to regulate labour recruitment, and specifically, the *dalaal* system which allows licensed agents in Dhaka to extend its reach into the rural areas without actually setting up operations there. As *dalaals* are informal recruiters with no formal identification documents, licensed recruiters dealing through the *dalaal* system are able to conceal a paper trail that allows both licensed recruiters and their informal sub-agents to “commit fraud and evade their [legal] responsibilities [to their clients]” (ibid: 78). Hence, BAIRA’s parliamentary presence allows it to ensure that government policies on labour emigration remain “recruitment industry friendly” (ibid: 76). Furthermore, BAIRA, unlike other industry bodies, is not self-regulating – it does not have any set code of conduct to regulate the behaviour of its own members (ibid).

For these reasons, the recruitment process clearly works to the advantage of recruiters, often to the detriment of migrant workers. This also means that the exorbitant sums of money the latter fork out for supposedly lucrative jobs in Singapore effectively come with no money back guarantees. *Dalaals* often make promises to prospective migrants regarding wage-rates and working conditions that the *dalaals* themselves have little or no knowledge and control over. While only one of my respondents admitted that he had
been a victim of outright fraud (i.e. recruitment fees were paid for no real job), about half my respondents indicated that at some point or another, various false promises were made by their sub-agents regarding pay and work arrangements. In a typical instance, Jabel was told by his sub-agent that his basic wage would be S$20 per day. However, when he arrived in Singapore, he was told by his employer that his basic wage would be S$17 per day (Interview, 11-11-2010). Similarly, Kabir Hossain was told by his sub-agent that despite his low starting pay of S$18 per day (he was initially promised S$20 when he paid his sub-agent S$8,000), he would get at least five hours of overtime per day and would get to earn over S$1,000 a month. Furthermore, the sub-agent told Kabir that the company would renew his contract after the first year with a certain salary increment to ensure that Kabir could start making a healthy “profit” after working for the first year to cover his initial “investment”. For one year, Kabir only averaged two hours of overtime a day and earned no more than S$700 a month. He was repatriated at the end of his one-year contract as his company did not have enough jobs to renew the work permits of all their workers (Interview, 25-12-2011).

In such instances, there is almost nothing a return migrant can do to make a sub-agent reimburse a portion of the recruitment fees. Between 2005 and 2012, I have come to know of two instances where migrants from wealthier families who wield political influence at the local level have been able to use their political connections to pressure sub-agents (assuming that these sub-agents are from the area within which these families wield political power) into some form of arbitration at the village or union (an administrative unit comprising several villages) level. Yet, these instances are indeed rare. While NGOs such as WARBE offer support to return migrants in informal local-level arbitration, almost all my respondents felt that such efforts would usually be in vain as sub-agents (who are certainly wealthier than the typical migrant worker) normally have stronger political connections to allow the former to influence the decision of village arbitration committees. Furthermore, Bangladeshi NGOs such as WARBE tend to be less concerned with return migrants from Singapore as they believe the problems faced by Singapuri returnees are relatively less than returnees from Malaysia and the Middle East, since the rule of law is well established in Singapore (Interview with Saiful Haque, WARBE Founder, 26-04-2012). The Singapore government, on the other hand, takes a “hands-off approach” when it comes to
recruitment fees paid by migrant workers to Bangladeshi recruiters and does not assist workers with grievances arising out of recruitment (Al Jazeera English, 19-08-2009).

**What is at Stake: Various Outcomes of Migration Projects**

The political economy of the recruitment process in Bangladesh, coupled with the socio-moral expectations of return migrants informed by images of *bidesh*, mean that migration projects turn into a high-stakes gamble. Succeed and the individual and his family will be in a relatively better-off situation and held to high esteem in the local community. Fail and he faces financial ruin and social ostracism. I will now discuss various possible and actual migration outcomes in relation to their objectives and circumstances to understand what is at stake for these migrants. I do this in order to understand what Bangladeshi migrant workers need to strive for or defend once they enter the sphere of employment in Singapore. From the examples below, it will become clear that the success of migration projects becomes dependent on extended tenure and a strong earning capacity within their assigned companies. However, both tenure and earning capacity are often compromised by employer tendencies towards applying wage pressures, migrant worker deportability and occupational immobility in Singapore.

First time migrants are generally aware that they will not become rich instantly and know that it will take several years for them to repay their loans and accumulate enough wealth to improve the economic and social positions of their families. These expectations are usually based on the belief (or hope) that their initial one- or two-year tenures are annually extended several times (various interviews with workers). Monir, for instance, having paid S$9,000 to a recruiter, believed that it will take him five years to pay off his loan and then save the S$15,000 he would need to start a new business (Interview, 28-04-2012). Mathematically, it is indeed possible for Monir to use his first year to completely pay back his loan (S$750 per month, assuming no interest) and subsequently save about S$315 every month for the next four years. However, Monir’s earning capacity and tenure are potentially undermined by the deportability of migrant workers and employer tendencies towards applying wage pressures. It is possible that his contract will not be renewed after the first year. Worse still, Monir’s contract can be unilaterally terminated by his employer and he may be repatriated before the completion of his one year contract. Monir would then have to fork out additional money to secure another job in Singapore which he hopes will deliver a better outcome for him. Furthermore,
Monir’s employer may demand a kickback for renewing his work permit; it is also possible that Monir would not receive a considerable salary increment or sufficient overtime hours to muster a healthy monthly wage; Monir could be subject to various monthly salary deductions for meals, housing and levies – all of these would significantly compromise Monir’s earning capacity.

Outright migration failure usually involves the premature termination of employment during the first contract and negligible earnings. It might spell financial ruin for relatively less well-off or less economically stable families, or if the entire family becomes entirely reliant on the migrant’s earnings or if a large portion of the recruitment fee was borrowed on interest from local moneylenders. Bulbul, for instance, comes from a modhom family with relatively small landholding – about 20 decimals – while his father had to retire from the army for health reasons. Because his family was unable to raise sufficient funds for him to work in Singapore as a construction worker, Bulbul borrowed S$5,000 of his initial S$7,000 recruitment fee from a village moneylender on interest in 2008. During his first stint in Singapore, his employment was terminated after only six months and he was repatriated. Still in debt, Bulbul borrowed another S$5,000 to secure a second job in Singapore where he was injured after only two weeks of work. Fortunately for Bulbul, a migrant worker NGO in Singapore assisted him in making a work injury compensation claim through which he was eventually awarded S$5,000 as compensation. This allowed him to fully settle his second debt, but the initial debt had now swelled to S$8,000. He managed to borrow another S$3,000 to secure a third stint in Singapore. Unfortunately, after only eight months in that job, his employment was again prematurely terminated and he had to return to Bangladesh with over S$10,000 of debt. Bulbul was afraid to return to his village as the moneylenders had been demanding their money and he decided to hide out somewhere in Dhaka city (about 3 hours away from his village). His father was compelled to sell some land and farm animals to make repairs to the family home after it was damaged in a recent cyclone. When I met Bulbul in Dhaka in May 2012, he showed little concern for the honour or prestige of his family since his family’s subsistence had become problematic. He now plans to source around Dhaka to raise money for a fourth stint in Singapore to repay his debts, failing which, he intends to

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33 Bulbul was not very clear on the rate of interest he borrowed on. However, he did indicate that after some minor repayment, the total sum owed has swelled to S$8,000 a year later.
move his entire family to Dhaka and engage in blue-collar wage work. “Anything”, he says, “any job also I will do, rickshaw, factory, anything.” (Interview, 02-05-2012)

On the other hand, the cost of migration failure can be less on migrant workers from wealthier families. Sumon, for instance, comes from a wealthy family where his extended family controls in excess of 400 decimals of land. In addition, his father has a cotton processing business and his older brother (a return migrant himself) owns eight power looms producing saris and loongis/sarongs for export and the domestic market. His older brother, working in Singapore for eight years at that time, paid an agent S$8,000 to secure Sumon a job in Singapore. Sumon’s employment was terminated after only six months on the job after his company had failed to pay the workers their wages. Despite losing all of his brother’s money, Sumon’s family was in a strong enough economic position to withstand the loss. Upon his return to Bangladesh, his father disallowed Sumon from going to Singapore again thinking he lacked the intelligence and ability to work overseas. Sumon was made to oversee his father’s cotton processing business and was rarely allowed to work unsupervised as his father and older brother thought him to be innately incompetent. His fellow villagers often compared him to his more established and respected older brother, referring to Sumon as the incompetent younger one. In the village market, shopkeepers and traders rarely afforded him the respect accorded to the rest of his kin-group – while his father and brother were often invited by traders and shopkeepers into their shops and offered refreshments, Sumon was largely ignored when present at the market. While Sumon’s social prestige was hit hard by his failure and his position within his kin-group’s internal hierarchy was undermined, his family was still able to maintain their standard of living despite his outright migration failure (Interview, 15-04-2012).

The relative economic condition of migrants’ families prior to migration seem to be of greater importance given that most of my interview respondents who were relatively more successful in terms of accumulating wealth from abroad and withstanding setbacks in employment tended to come from either larger landholding families (usually above 200 decimals) and/or came from families with two or more other economically active family members. The availability of relatively larger landholdings and the presence of more economically active male family members (usually fathers and brothers) often provide a “buffer” of sorts that mitigates migration failure.
However, from my interviews in Singapore and my observations in Comila and Sirajganj, it seems that, more often than not, migrants to Singapore are neither outright failures nor do they become extremely wealthy. The most common outcome of temporary labour migration to Singapore is economic stagnation at home. While they would have fully paid up all debts (often taking between nine months and two years), they are unable to accumulate sufficient cash savings to meet the objectives of their projects even though their net-earnings during their time in Singapore are positive. In such cases, these migrants can face the exacerbation of wealth-status discrepancies, and sometimes even shame. Migrants often return to even higher status expectations as they are presumed to be extremely wealthy. While many of them try to appear wealthy through their dress and gifts to friends and kin, their insufficient earnings continue to haunt them; while many can afford gifts for their friends and new urbane clothes, they may be unable to afford to renovate or build new homes or to start up business endeavours.

After seven years in four different companies in Singapore, Delwar is still haunted by his inability to accumulate enough wealth to build a new house for himself and his parents, to start a new family (he was still single at 32) or to purchase the power looms he so desires. While he is not seen as a failure by any means (he had cleared his debts after two years of work), his work stints in Singapore have been hampered by unstable tenure and poor earning capacity. After paying S$6,000 for his first job in Singapore, he was repatriated at the end of his one-year contract. Because he was paid poorly, he was unable to fully repay the loan he took from his sister’s husband. After taking another S$2,000 loan from his brother-in-law, he returned to Singapore, and this time, wound up at a better company that paid him fairly well. During his two years in this company, he was able to finally return the S$8,000 he borrowed from his brother-in-law while supporting his parents and two unmarried sisters. Unfortunately, that “good” company ran out of construction contracts after two years and Delwar had to be repatriated. Again, Delwar paid S$3,000, this time out of his own savings, to return to Singapore. While he was given long overtime hours at his third company, the firm made many deductions from his wages and demanded S$1,500 as kickbacks for annual contract renewal. After working for two years, Delwar decided not to renew his contract as he felt that the kickbacks he had to pay annually were compromising his ability to save money. He then used another S$3,000 he had saved up from the past two years to pay
for his fourth stint in Singapore – this time a two-year contract. During this time, Delwar was able to earn above S$1,000 a month due to a higher basic salary (S$24 a day) and the long overtime hours he had to work. At the end of the two-year contract, however, his employer demanded a S$2,000 kickback for “contract renewal” which Delwar declined (Interview, 10-10-2010).

Delwar’ inability to accumulate sufficient wealth can be owed to a range of various reasons that have been discussed in this and in the previous chapter – the political economic nature of the recruitment process; the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers and the use of wage pressures in the construction industry. These factors, together, undermined his earning capacity and provided little stability in his work tenure. While Delwar was still able to be the sole provider of his family to allow them to lead a comfortable life during his seven years – both his younger sisters have since graduated from university, their higher education entirely financed by Delwar – he is still unable to “make a life” for himself. He feels compelled to migrate again, but wants to marry and have a child before his next stint as he feels age is catching up with him. However, during his recent efforts to find a wife, he told me that prospective brides were not keen on marrying him if he was to return to Singapore for several more years (Interview, 12-04-2012).

Shafiq’ story is a little more tragic: after four difficult years in Singapore fraught with excessive salary deductions and forced repatriation, he has been unable to fully repay the loans he took from his relatives. At the age of 31, he returned to Bangladesh and sought to marry. However, he recalls that no family he approached was willing to marry their daughters off to him as not only had he not earned anything after four years in Singapore, he had not even repaid his loans. As he had nothing to show for his four years in Singapore, prospective in-laws had assumed that he had spent his wealth immorally or is plainly incompetent. In his search for a bride, his worth as an individual was publicly called into question. Shafiq feels that by the time he earns enough money, if he ever does, he would be too old to marry a girl from a respectable family (Interview, 08-01-2012).

Dulal has similar issues. After the death of his mother, his father remarried and started a new family. Dulal, then unemployed in his mid-20s, moved into his paternal uncle’s home. After borrowing S$6,000 from his uncle and several relatives, he went to
Singapore to work. After a two-year stint in Singapore, Dulal repaid his loans but has little else to show for it. Upon returning to his village, his uncle advises him that since he has earned something from bidesh, it is now time for Dulal to build his own home and move out of his uncle’s house. Dulal, on his part, was hard-pressed to admit that he could not afford to do so. To admit that he had no money to support himself after two years in Singapore would make him the subject of derision and repudiation both within and beyond his kin-group (Interview, 07-10-2010).

Rasel is slightly more fortunate (or unfortunate): his trajectory is similar to that of Delwar but he has since managed to find a wife who bore him a daughter this year. For Rasel, all of his three stints in Singapore have effectively been “break-even” ones – while he had always managed to cover the initial outlay for recruitment fees, he has never quite earned enough money to renovate his family home or build separate living quarters for his new family, let alone to start a new business. Like Delwar, he constantly deals with social expectations by acting wealthy through providing gifts to his friends and financial support to poorer villagers34. However, he struggles to deal with questions from his uncles and men outside the kin-group like, “when will you build separate sleeping quarters for your new family? You should have saved up enough by now!” (Interviews, 11-11-2010, 27-04-2012)

The stories of Delwar, Dulal, Rasel, and to a lesser extent, Shafiq, illustrate the various migration trajectories among my respondents. While they do not end up in financial ruin, they are no closer to reaching the objectives of their migration projects. They are assumed to be wealthy but they struggle to live up to these heightened expectations. The predicament of “nothing to do” becomes more acute. After clearing their debts and providing for their families, they are left with small cash savings that are too small to be capitalised on. Their inability to live up to these new expectations leaves them open to being socially ostracised when seeking a spouse, or even when attempting to do business. Khokhon, in Comila, points to a middle-aged man tending a small provisions shop, “Five years in Singapore, and only one small shop!” he said condescendingly (Fieldnotes, 28-04-2012). It is for these reasons that such migrants usually feel the

34 This is not to say that he is not sincere about this - Rasel truly does believe that he should be helping poorer families in his community. The fact remains, however, that, after five years in Singapore, he is expected to give whenever he is asked and he can no longer say that he is “short on cash”. 
compulsion to migrate again – they need to keep trying until they can start living up to what is expected of them.

Thus it is obvious that the success of migration projects is contingent on extended tenure and strong earning capacity in employment due to the political economy of the recruitment process as well as the occupational immobility of migrant workers in Singapore. However, from the examples above, we can see that factors such as migrant worker deportability and employer tendencies towards wage pressures – especially in the form of kickbacks that workers have to pay to have their tenure extended – often undermine the earnings and tenure of migrant workers. At the same time, we can see that the cost of migration failure, or even the inability of migrants to accumulate sufficient wealth, can be considerably acute. Migrants from less economically stable family situations – poorer families, families where the migrant is the sole provider, situations where all or most of the recruitment fees are funded by high-interest loans – often face financial ruin and will encounter significant problems in ensuring family subsistence needs are met. Most migrants, as the examples show, face a different form of crisis in the event of unsuccessful migration. In such cases the problems of modhom people having “nothing to do” becomes exacerbated. These return migrants often face shame and social ostracisation by their kin and community as well as strains on family resources when they do not accumulate sufficient wealth to “make a life”. As we see from the examples, failure to meet the socio-moral expectations of migration has a negative impact on an individual migrant’s life-chances. While migration failure does not always problematise the subsistence of migrants’ families, the consequences of failure are considerably significant.

**Conclusion: The Significance of Migration Projects**

By conceptualising temporary labour migration from Bangladesh to Singapore as a migration project, I have illustrated the circumstances under which Bangladeshi migrant workers enter the wage-labour relation. Because modhom men have little ability to accumulate wealth in order to live up to status expectations, they seek to improve their families’ life-chances by attempting to acquire wealth from bidesh. However, the objectives of their projects are undermined by the means through which they seek to

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35 This is why migrants have to pay agents, again, in order to return to Singapore after their existing tenure has been terminated.
accomplish their objectives, namely, the recruitment process. The political economy of the recruitment process is characterised by the recruiters’ association using their parliamentary presence to ensure that there is little legal protection for emigrants within Bangladesh who often go into debt when paying exorbitant recruitment fees. As a result, migrants can do little to influence the recruitment process which, together with their occupational immobility in Singapore, makes their projects vulnerable to failure. As a result, Bangladeshi migrant workers become dependent on extended tenure and a strong earning capacity, which in turn are potentially undermined by employers’ tendencies towards wage pressures and migrant worker deportability in Singapore. Despite the cards being stacked against them, these migrants can ill-afford their projects to fail as even the inability to accumulate sufficient wealth to “make a life” will bring migrants shame and ostracisation, as well as put a strain on their families’ economic resources.

The nature of these migration projects and the cost of migration failure provide us a starting point from which to observe Bangladeshi migrant workers within the labour process. These projects represent what they are trying to accomplish within the sphere of employment – in other words, their aims, aspirations, interests and fears. While not always faced with compulsions of subsistence, the inability to succeed brings shame, ostracisation and economic strain to themselves and their families. These socio-moral and economic compulsions mean that Bangladeshi workers need to strive towards or defend their earning capacity and job stability, which are in turn undermined by wage pressures and migrant worker deportability. Within the production process, these workers, on their part, devise a range of tactics or strategies to forward the interests of their projects while navigating through wage pressures and their own deportability. It is in this sense that migration projects are a significant constituent of the particular form production politics take within the construction site. In the next three chapters, I will elucidate the nature of conflict that arises on the worksite due to these tensions and, more importantly, the particular workplace strategies these migrant workers devise to forward the interests of their projects as well as the outcomes that these may bring.
Chapter Four

Constituting Workplace Struggles: The Politics of Obedience

In order to gauge the extent to which workplace struggles between Bangladeshi migrant workers and their employers challenge the existing migrant labour regime, we need to understand what form these struggles take and why. I argue that, in this setting, class struggle tends to take the form of a “politics of obedience” where these workers tactically use obedience to informally re-negotiate the effort reward bargain. This form of production politics is also characterised by enduring tensions between the wage pressures used by employers and the migration projects of workers within the effort-reward bargain. These workers rarely resort to confrontational politics and generally demonstrate obedience to the personal authority of work superiors. Their tactic of obedience tends to centre on the avoidance of conflict with and attempts to siphon better rewards from work superiors.

Within this form of production politics, I am specifically concerned with why Bangladeshi migrant workers tend to obey and are reluctant to confront their superiors, despite deep dissatisfaction with wage-pressure strategies they experience. These observations, especially among politically disempowered working-class factions such as migrant labour, are hardly unique, yet questions remain over the conditions under which migrant worker discontent does or does not turn into contentious struggles. Both ethnographic and political economy accounts of migrant labour struggles emphasise the political powerlessness of migrant workers and their migration projects as prohibitive to confrontational politics (e.g. Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Mitchell, 1996; Pinches, 2001; de Genova, 2005; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Constable, 2007; Binford, 2009). Similarly, in Chapters Two and Three, I have emphasised the prohibitions posed by migrant-labour laws and migration projects on migrant worker agency/resistance. While they are indispensible considerations, structural coercion and the inhibitions of migration projects by themselves do not sufficiently explain why workers consistently deliver obedient work despite enduring discontent. In this chapter, I explain the prevalence of this form of production politics by emphasising the tactical aspect of obedience. I show that obedience as a tactic arises out of particular material circumstances – circumstances such as migrant worker powerlessness and the compulsions of migration projects, but also the manner in which production is organised.
within the construction industry – that confront these workers within the labour process. Specifically, I argue that it is the precise manner in which structural coercion and migration projects are situated within the dynamics of control – i.e. the process by which employers seek to get work out of workers – that explains why workers, as well as their employers, engage in this politics of obedience.

**Literature and Approach**

The political economy literature on migrant labour politics indicates that migrant workers’ ability to challenge exploitation and control and forward their own interests in the workplace are curtailed by the structural coercive mechanisms as constructed by the state (Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Mitchell, 1996; de Genova, 2005; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Binford, 2009). Structural coercion, through the construction of migrant worker “powerlessness”, at the political economy level is seen to translate into the prevalence of coercive control over migrant workers at the production level where migrant worker discontent is suppressed by threats, punishment and deportation. These studies argue that migrant worker resistance in the worksite is undermined by their inability to access trade union politics, their lack of basic legal and political rights, their occupational immobility and their deportable status. Worker discontent over working conditions can easily be dealt with by employers who use coercive means to either produce a submissive migrant labour force or put down worker agitation (ibid). In tandem, ethnographic accounts of migrant worker struggles have emphasised the role of migration objectives (or projects, as I call them here) as prohibitive to contention within the workplace (Pinches, 2001; Constable, 2007). It is argued that migrant workers will tolerate hardship and comply with the terms of control because of the need to provide for their families or for the prospect of upward social mobility back home.

While I submit a critique of both these positions as insufficient to explain the prevalence of the politics of obedience in this context, I must state that I agree with both these arguments. From the data I have collected through interviews with Bangladeshi migrant workers, NGO staff and employers, as well as observations made while working on the job at a construction firm, migrant worker powerlessness and the compulsions of migration projects do prove prohibitive for migrant workers to

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36 A submissive workforce is not necessarily an example of obedience as the former is kept in place by fear and punishment while the latter yields to the command of an authority figure without the need for coercion.
challenge exploitation and control in the workplace. However, these two factors alone do not fully explain why workplace struggles take the form of workers using obedience to informally renegotiate the terms of their exploitation in the midst of enduring dissatisfaction over contractor wage pressure strategies.

First, if we consider these two factors alone, what is more likely is a production politics centred around submission – where workers are kept in place out of fear of punishment – or one centred on struggles over coercion and submission. While instances of submission and contentious struggles have been noted in my data, these do not happen ordinarily. These workers frequently yield to the command of authority figures such as employers, managers and supervisors. While migration projects can inhibit worker resistance – e.g. workers choose not to resist out of fear that they will be deported to face large amounts of debt – they can also make it necessary for workers to challenge the terms of control – e.g. workers have to find ways to pre-empt or resist deportation so that they don’t return to debt. In essence, workplace struggles contain significant nuances that cannot simply be explained in terms of suppression or inhibition alone.

Second, the migrant labour literature (cf. Sargeson, 1999) does not consider the “workplace” as a labour process within a capitalist society. The labour process is the site where something very particular happens – it is where the valorisation objective of capital comes to be concretised (Brighton Labour Process Group, 1977). Labour power, workers’ capacity to work, needs to be translated into labour, an actual expenditure of effort (Burawoy, 1985: 26). In concrete terms, employers need to set workers to work and ensure it is done. This is done through a mode of control where employers seek to obtain “desired work behaviour from workers” (Edwards, 1979: 17). The problematique of the labour process, from this perspective, is thus: how do employers get work out of workers (Thompson, 1989: 123). This is a question that existing works on migrant worker struggles do not explicitly consider. While many works on migrant-labour struggles talk about struggles in the “workplace”, there are limited studies of those that analyse it as a labour process where employers try to get work out of workers.

This becomes more significant when we consider that there is a distinction between the use of coercion to get work out of workers – i.e. command and direct work through the use of threats, punishment and abuse – and the use of coercion to suppress worker agitation – e.g. the forced deportation of striking workers. The existing literature has
almost exclusively focused on the latter aspect of coercion. This distinction becomes particularly important when considering workers’ opportunities for contestation, whether overt or covert. The presence or absence of coercion in the direction and command of work has consequences for the nature of opportunities that the workers in question have to challenge or accommodate the status-quo at work. The particular nature of coercion, whether to direct work or to counteract resistance, can tell us more about the practical logic of obedience – whether obedience is an outcome of suppression or whether it represents a tactical effort to pre-empt/avoid coercion.

In short, a focus purely on structural coercion and the inhibitions of migration projects, while significant factors in this analysis, is insufficient to explain the prevalence of this politics of obedience. My approach, as I have stated in Chapter One, involves examining how structural coercion and the compulsions of migration projects are situated within the process of contractors attempting to get work out of workers. Actual strategies of control, and the effort-reward bargain it produces, are analysed to reveal how political powerlessness and migration projects play out within these dynamics. In doing so, I focus on the manner in which the confluence of these factors forecloses and creates opportunities for workers to tactically pursue or defend their immediate goals.

**Work Arrangements, Control and Command**

The “construction industry” in Singapore does not only refer to the construction of buildings. It includes a broad range of activities such as: the building, alteration, maintenance and removal/demolition of fixed structures such as roads, bridges, railways, harbours, cableways, canals, pipelines, tunnels, viaducts, etc.; electrical, water, gas and telecommunications installation and maintenance; drainage and plumbing workers; and land reclamation among many others (Ministry of Manpower, 2011). Due to the varied and diverse nature of the industry, work arrangements are largely heterogeneous. Workers may be deployed to work in large enclosed construction sites or small non-automated workshops. They may be deployed in small autonomous detachments (usually under the charge of a supervisor or foreman) to various open sites around the island or within the premises of clients when doing maintenance work. The duration of each deployment can vary greatly depending on the nature of the company’s work and the size of the construction project. Many contractors have operations on
more than one site and may often redeploy or cross-deploy workers based on their overall labour needs.

Despite these variations, there is a degree of consistency within the industry regarding the manner in which work is commanded, delegated and coordinated at various worksites. I have shown in Chapter Two that the industry is relatively un-automated and a very significant proportion of it (96%) comprises small and medium-sized firms. Such firms do not have the ability or resources to utilise sophisticated and complex bureaucratic controls to command and coordinate work. Managerial procedures cannot always be easily routinised or institutionalised into systematic administrative structures.

For this reason, and as the interviews and observations reveal, employer strategies of command and coordination are largely direct, ad hoc, hierarchical and highly personalised. As and when projects get awarded, contractors and/or project managers personally delegate tasks to supervisors and foremen who command, instruct, guide and sometimes assist workers at the designated point of production. This hierarchical command and coordination of work is based on the positional and personal authority that work superiors (employers, managers, supervisors and, to a lesser extent, foremen) have over their charges to direct work tasks. In short, workers are personally and directly commanded by their work superiors, often through face-to-face communication on what to do, when to do it, who to do it with, where to do it, how to do it and when it should be completed by. The evaluation of work is often based on quality and timeliness. Work needs to meet the required standard of quality and has to be completed within a given, but malleable, timeframe. These standards are often determined by the requirements of clients – which can be negotiated to varying extents between the client’s clerk-of-works and the contractor – as well as the subjective judgements of work superiors. While there are no formalised means within firms by which workers can challenge or negotiate these commands, I will subsequently demonstrate that they are constantly negotiated on a highly informal and personal basis.

37 The authority that work superiors have over their charges is primarily derived from their position within the organisational structure. However, as it will be subsequently evident, this positional authority is exercised (by work superiors) and received (by workers) in a highly personalised manner. Within the dynamics of control, the personalised aspect of positional authority is significant as it proves to be the conduit of worker negotiations.

38 Familiarity and routine may render this unnecessary.
Forms of supervision

While hierarchies of authority and command tend to be constant within the construction industry, supervisory arrangements tend to vary based on the specific production activities and personnel availability (i.e. availability of labour and supervisory staff) of individual contractor firms. From my interviews and observations, I found that supervisory arrangements tend to be one or a combination of the following.

Constant supervision

This means that a supervisor, manager or the contractor/proprietor himself is constantly at the point of production to directly oversee the execution of work tasks. My interviews revealed some form of constant supervision in about 20 of the 97 stints documented. These are stints where work was mostly or always performed in large building construction sites. Workers subject to constant supervision were usually (just over half) involved in piling, foundational work or heavy (machine) lifting operations as riggers, signalmen, welders or machine operators in large building sites. In such operations, it is a statutory requirement for a qualified lifting supervisor and/or safety supervisor to be present at all times to coordinate and oversee the lifting or piling operations. The remaining instances involved general workers or labourers on large building sites and one instance of a worker employed by a public utilities (sewerage) contractor (combined with owner-operator).

Constant supervision can often be passive where the supervisor or contractor merely watches over the execution of tasks. The work superior periodically guides, instructs or assist workers in their tasks. They also act to remind workers of deadlines or urge them to return to work if they have been resting for some time. Constant supervision may also be intrusive. Contractors and supervisors may use threats, harsh language and various forms of abuse to drive the workers on and to intensify the pace of work. However, based on my findings, instances of intrusive and constant supervision are not common (five out of 20) but, nonetheless, do occur. In short, this form of supervision involves the constant presence of a work superior who uses his positional or personal authority to ensure that desired work behaviour is forthcoming from workers.

39 In heavy-lifting operations, the lifting supervisor also has to directly coordinate all lifting operations. He has to give pre-lift safety briefings, perform technical calculations relating to loads and crane-boom extensions and ensure that all his charges (riggers, signalmen and general workers) are clear about their roles in the operation.
Periodic/punctuated supervision

This means that workers are subjected to direct supervision periodically during the working day. The contractor or supervisor is present at the point of production or worksite for between one and four hours within an eight to 12-hour working day. During the rest of the time, an appointed foreman, usually with very limited authority, leads the execution of work tasks. In many firms, such as EW Construction, foremen are usually the more senior or competent workers drawn from the rank-and-file and tend to form the bridge between supervisory instruction and task execution, albeit without the formal\textsuperscript{40} authority of the former. This was the predominant mode of supervision within EW Construction (combined with workshop deployments) and occurred in about 35 of the 97 stints documented.

The amount of time a work superior spends supervising work directly may vary on a daily basis, contingent on a range of other factors such as the total number of sites workers have to be deployed at, the nature of particular work tasks at each site, the coordination of construction materials, etc. Within this arrangement, supervisors or contractors usually make it a point to check on their workers at least once a day. The work superior uses this time to ensure that all workers are working\textsuperscript{41} and that work is progressing as expected. During this time, workers are free to raise any issues\textsuperscript{42} they have regarding the execution and completion of work tasks. The work superior may dismiss these issues or make arrangements to deal with them.

Supervision often takes this form as contractor firms tend to have many worksites that are spread out over a fairly large geographical area – either the construction site is sprawling or the company has work on several separate sites on the island. Some firms, being small, do not have a sufficient number of supervisors to be constantly stationed at every single worksite. Supervisors and employers themselves play an important role in the overall coordination of production within the firm – contractors need to meet clients and supervisors need to ensure the supply of materials to various worksites is

\textsuperscript{40} Formal authority is delegated from employer to supervisor. While responsibility for the completion of work tasks is further delegated from supervisor to foreman (where applicable), this does not usually come with the formal delegation of authority. In most cases, the foreman is part of the rank-and-file. When he does command and direct work, it is often solely through the personal authority he commands from his charges.

\textsuperscript{41} He often assumes workers are slacking off when he is not around.

\textsuperscript{42} For example, technical difficulties, safety concerns, shortage of tools or materials, etc.
coordinated, among many other tasks. Constant supervision is, therefore, not possible or even desirable in the broader interests of the firm. Like constant supervision, punctuated supervision can be either passive or intrusive. However, the chances of intrusive supervision are slightly higher given the shorter period of time the work superior is at the worksite.

Autonomous work detachments

This is when a small group of workers – usually between two and five – is deployed at worksites unsupervised. This arrangement usually involves the contractor/supervisor/driver picking workers up from the dormitory/company office/company workshop at the beginning of the working day and driving them to the point of production where these workers work unsupervised. At the end of the working day or when the task is supposed to be completed, whichever is earlier, the work superior comes to pick the workers up to redeploy them or to bring them back to the dormitory.

Autonomous work detachments, which occurred in about 30 of the 97 stints documented, are mostly used by small renovations contractors (e.g. home/office renovations) or for small-scale electrical installations. Painters also tend to be deployed on a similar basis. During my observations at EW Construction, the painters and the workers employed by the electrical subcontractor were deployed on this basis.

In autonomous work detachments, work is assessed by the contractor or supervisor during the pick-up at the end of the day. Work deadlines are often determined by the subjective judgements of work superiors after considering and negotiating the deadlines of their clients. The painters of EW Construction and the workers employed by the electrical subcontractor told me that their supervisors “more or less know” how long a certain designated work task would take and that the latter would expect work to be completed to a satisfactory level when he came to pick them up. When work has not proceeded satisfactorily, work superiors may turn to more intrusive forms of supervision to ensure that work is completed on time. My interview respondents also reported similar expectations of work superiors when deployed unsupervised.
Workshop deployments

From the interviews, I discovered that in about 25 stints, workers work in small mechanised but non-automated workshops preparing work materials that would be transported to various worksites. In these workshops, materials such as steel, wood, concrete and solid-surfaces are crafted and modified before they can be used at construction sites. The division of labour within these workshops is fairly rudimentary as pairs or small groups of workers are assigned to crafting or modifying particular materials that these workers see to completion. Very often, contractors or supervisors are only periodically present (sometimes less than one hour a day) and workers are left to complete the production of materials on their own within a given time frame determined by the work superior.

Workers interviewed reported that their movements on the shop floor were often monitored by surveillance cameras set up by the boss. This was also the case at the EW Construction workshop where I worked for ten days (I had visited the workshop to pick up materials on many other occasions). According to the managing director of EW Construction, he had set up these cameras to ensure that workers were not idling on the job or stopping work before the clock-out time. From my own observations, these cameras seemed to be more successful for the latter as workers did not dare to leave work before 7pm on weekdays and 5pm on Sundays. However, workers who wanted to slack off could easily move themselves to the edges of the shop floor, which was out of the camera’s view. It soon became common practice for new workers (myself included) to be constantly dragged out of the shop floor (and onto the fringes) when they were standing idle within the view of the cameras.

Owner-operator

Here, the contractor is an owner-operator who commands a small detachment of workers on small renovation and maintenance projects. In this case, the owner-operator commands his workers directly and works alongside them. Whilst observable in Singapore, only one stint involved such a supervisory arrangement.

Wage pressures as “company rules”

As I have demonstrated in Chapter Two, the political-economic development of migrant worker policy in Singapore has created a tendency for contractors to use wage pressures
as a key strategy in protecting their profits within a highly competitive industry and within the context of cost pressures brought about by government policies. These wage pressures are manifest in direct salary deductions for a range of items (levy, housing, food, utilities, security deposits, absenteeism, etc.), withholding of wages, kickbacks and a range of indirect wage pressures such as wage stagnation and paying rest-day and overtime wages below statutory rates. Direct wage pressures (deductions, withholding wages and kickbacks) are used to transfer financial costs and risks associated with the hiring, training and maintenance of the labour power of migrant workers back onto migrant workers themselves. Indirect wage pressures, on the other hand, tend to be used to increase the factor productivity of labour. Kickbacks can additionally be pocketed by employers for personal gain.

Based on my interviews and observations, I discovered that these wage pressures are implemented by employers as ad hoc “company rules”. Respondents reflected to me that when they question their employers or supervisors on deductions or rates of overtime pay, they are merely told that these are “company rules” and should be followed. Most respondents also point out that their concerns over these wage pressures are dismissed by their employers, but usually without threats of reprisal. Significantly, workers are often not even informed of the implementation of new “rules” as they tend to discover them during pay-days when deductions are reflected on their salary slips or when they start to notice a marked drop in their monthly wage. In actual fact, few firms have proper formally codified rules - workers are simply told what to do through the command hierarchy and are expected to accept their working conditions. The implementation of wage pressures as “company rules” is effectively a message to the workers that they should accept these wage pressures in order to continue working for the company.

**Tensions in the Workplace: Worker Discontent**

My interviews and observations revealed that, overwhelmingly, worker discontent in the workplace is directly or indirectly related to wage pressures. Many respondents express unhappiness over low and stagnant basic wages, few overtime hours, being paid

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43 Additionally, I discovered that very few workers actually receive salary-slips that tabulate their working hours and salary deductions. This is because several wage-pressure strategies used by employers (certain deductions and lower pay for overtime work, for instance) contravene Singapore’s labour laws and contractors want to avoid leaving a paper-trail.
Below statutory rates for overtime and rest-day work, various kinds of salary deductions and having to pay kickbacks for contract renewal. Workers are unhappy with how these wage pressures depress their monthly earnings and undermine the success of their migration projects. The quotes typify how most of my respondents and colleagues felt about their work-stints.

This company no good. Everyday OT (overtime work) only two hour. OT money only give three dollar [per hour]. [My] basic salary [is] 18 dollar, can give three-dollar OT ah? After one year, boss give basic salary up, now 20 dollar. But OT still give three dollar! (Masood Rana, Interview, 09-11-2010)

This company every man [basic] salary 18 dollar. New coming 18 dollar, 5 years working also 18 dollar. One dollar also cannot up. Stupid company! Why I working this company? Coming time I give eight thousand dollar. Now one month salary coming 500, 600. Like this how to profit? How my family can progress? (Mostafa, Interview, 05-01-2012)

Eh, this company everything also money-cutting. House-money (i.e. lodging) cut; makan (i.e. food) money cut; worker sick, doctor-money cut; contract renewal money cut. Every month, [gross] salary coming 700 plus. But money cutting one hundred plus, sometimes two hundred plus. Like this, every month I can send back (remit) only two hundred dollar. My father, mother, wife, all have to makan (eat). My baby (children) must go to school. Every month two hundred no enough! (Sagor, Interview, 25-12-2011)

Throughout the interviews, workers consistently decry how low and stagnant basic wages, salary deductions, and low overtime/rest-day rates, among other wage pressures, cause their monthly earnings to be insufficient to provide a respectable standard of living for their families and to allow a significant net financial gain (“profit”) for their migration projects. However, the discontent was not based on the money alone. In over half of the 97 stints analysed, workers complained about intrusive supervision and excessively “hard” (i.e. difficult and physically strenuous) and “dirty” work-task deployments.44

This job very dirty! Go inside the longkang (sewer), inside all rubbish (dirty) water. Every month the salary little bit, savings also little bit; job also very dirty. So I don’t like this job, the company no good. How to tahan (tolerate)? One year finish, I go back [to] Bangladesh. (Dulal, Interview, 07-10-2010)

44 Workers do not usually blame their employers for “dirty” deployments. However, the dirtiness of work often makes them think of their employers in negative terms. In the interviews, an exception was noted where one respondent reflected well on the personal character of his employer (“his heart very good”) even though he felt the job was “very dirty”.
First time I come Singapore, my supervisor give me one cangkul (hoe/mattock) tell me go maati-cutting (i.e. manual excavation). I shock ‘ready! I never think anybody in Singapore do maati-cutting! Today I tell people in Bangladesh I do maati-cutting ... [they] also don’t believe. This job so hard, my body very very tired. I think, I pay so much money to come to Singapore, I must do any job. But my basic salary is so low. Sunday working, boss also don’t pay double...So first time, I think this company is no good. Job no good, salary also no good. (Rahim, Interview, 22-04-2012)

I don’t like this job lah. Supervisor no good....many many talking. Working time he always disturb[s] [the] worker[s]. He say[s], ‘do like this, do like that, faster faster!’ Many disturb lah! (Rasel, Interview, 11-11-2010)

My last time (previous) company no good because they give the salary low. Actually not so low, sometimes have many overtime, can earn 1100 dollars [in a month]. But the job is very very hard. I am a good welder, but this job is harder than normal job. I working understand, my welding very good, so boss must increase my salary, but he never give. (Jewel, Interview, 08-01-2012)

The harsh nature of job tasks together with wage pressures makes their employers even more objectionable. While they are displeased with the physical nature of the job, low pay and salary deductions make the job, and hence their employers, particularly insufferable. There are no clear indications from my respondents on what constitutes “low”, “high” or an acceptable wage. Generally, workers consider a net monthly salary of S$800 to be somewhat acceptable, but this often varies based on the physical nature of the job and the way they perceive their skill and work competence. Workers strongly feel that competence should be rewarded with wage increments. This is why stagnant basic wages, no matter how acceptable they may have been at the start, are considered to be deplorable by workers.

It is also worth noting that despite the long hours of work, often between eight and 14 hours a day, workers rarely complain about long working hours. Only in four out of 97 stints were long working hours viewed negatively. Workers tend to welcome longer overtime hours (especially if it is paid at the statutory rate of 1.5 times the basic wage) as this enhances their overall earnings. At the same time, some workers also felt that working over 12 hours a day, every day of the week, has a negative effect on their health and bodies. Most workers seem to feel that four hours of overtime a day (if they get any at all), in addition to the eight hours of standard work, with sufficient breaks, is ideal for both their earning capacity and physical well-being. Jewel even went so far to
say that the ideal work-week would comprise two 14-hour days, two 12-hour days, two 10-hour days and an eight-hour Sunday work day paid at double-rate, all with an hour break for meals and 15-minute coffee-breaks twice a day. Jewel concluded that “like this, money also good, body also good” (Interview, 08-01-2012).

Most workers believe that the interests of workers are best served when the company is doing well. Almost all my respondents reflected that if the company has many well-paying contracts, workers will benefit greatly from the extended overtime hours they will be deployed to work. In this sense, a “no good company” is one where there are “no job[s]” as workers remain un-deployed (and hence unpaid) for days or weeks, or are restricted to only working eight hours a day with no overtime wages to supplement their low basic wages. At the same time, workers often come to realise, through their work experiences, that the objectives of the employers are different from and can often undermine or threaten their own. During one of the interviews, Delwar provided a lengthy description of how employer kickbacks undermined migration projects. He spoke of how Bangladeshi migrant workers forked out huge sums of money in the hope that their contracts would be renewed after their initial one-year stint. Employers, who pocket a portion of these fees, often decide to repatriate their workers at the end of their stints in order to bring in new workers. This, as Delwar believes, would allow the employer to pocket more kickbacks off new workers while entirely disregarding the debt situation of the existing workers (Interview, 10-10-2010). Because of practices like this, Delwar, like many of the workers I interviewed, felt that employers often intentionally impoverish their workers in order to enrich themselves. Other workers I interviewed often cited cases of their employers buying new and expensive-looking cars while insisting, to the workers, that the company was not doing well enough to warrant a raise in basic wages. As Liton plainly stated, “Every month boss have new car, but every time he say[s] company no profit, cannot increase the salary” (Interview, 26-12-2011). To most workers, wage pressures represent their employers attempting to enrich themselves at the expense of migration projects.

Yet, in a few other instances (17 out of 97 stints), workers indicate that they do not always encounter these problems and expressed some level of contentment and satisfaction with particular stints. This is despite the fact that some forms of wage pressures are still present within these stints. When I asked Shah Alam why he expressed content at his current job,
Shah Alam: ... [Company name] have many job, basic salary is good, 24 dollar. Supervisor and other man (workers) also very good, nicely talking. Many OT (overtime work) have, Sunday also have working. Boss also never cut any money. Renew money (kickbacks to employer for contract renewal) also don’t have. One month salary can come 1200 or more. Every month I send back 1000 or 800, my family also happy.

Me: Sunday pay double?

Shah Alam: No, Sunday pay 1.5 (i.e. below the statutory rate of double rate)

Me: But other workers complain...

Shah Alam: Yes, I know MOM law (i.e. labour laws) is double. But my company pay 1.5.

Me: You don’t have a problem with this?

Shah Alam: No, no problem. I know this one don’t follow MOM law, but I think like this can (i.e. this is acceptable). (Interview, 26-12-2011)

It might seem that Shah Alam’s acceptance of wage pressures may be because these wage pressures are minimal and his earning capacity appears to be relatively strong. However, these two aspects do not appear very consistently in the interview data collected. Respondents who do not express discontent with some of their stints do not necessarily have higher basic wage rates than other stints – the 17 “satisfactory” stints reveal a basic salary range of S$18 to S$24 a day, a range similar to the 80 “discontent” stints. The former do not necessarily have a higher monthly earning than the latter – two “satisfactory” stints revealed an average monthly salary of below S$800, a sum most workers would find rather “low”. Similarly, overtime hours for both “satisfactory” and “discontent” stints tend to vary. Wage pressures such as salary deductions and underpaid overtime and rest-day wages are also present in “satisfactory” stints. In short, “satisfactory” stints do not necessarily have better wages or working conditions than “discontent” stints. Content workers also do not necessarily have lower employment expectations arising from the individual circumstances of their migration projects. While all workers are explicitly concerned about their migration projects, content workers tend to be those who feel that migration is “working out” for them. While their actual financial and debt situation may vary during those particular stints (some were still heavily in debt while others were relatively debt free), all 17 workers, at that point, expressed a subjective optimism that their migration objectives could be accomplished within the firm they were then employed in. Discontented workers, on the other hand,
tend to be a lot less optimistic about the prospects of their migration projects within the employ of the company in question.

Therefore, it seems that worker discontent, while always somehow related to wage pressures, is not, in an objective sense, over these employer strategies per se, but rather over what they do to the effort-reward bargain. The difference between a “good” and “bad” company is not always the amount of money or “profit” a worker makes. Certainly, this point is important for workers, but what is equally important is that, on the job, the discontent of workers seems to be over the manner in which their efforts were rewarded. Wage pressures are problematic for workers not simply because they take home a lower wage, but because wage pressures are perceived to undercut the rewards for workers’ efforts. Workers constantly express their discontent over low and stagnant wages, salary deductions and kickbacks because these employer strategies stifle the rewards for their efforts. While many workers seem to have some idea of what constitutes a “high/good” or “low/bad” daily or monthly wage, the manner in which they talked about their different stints revealed that these standards often varied with the nature of the job and workers’ own perceptions of their competence, work experience and effort.

Jewel, for instance, was very satisfied and content with his first stint where he earned eight to nine hundred dollars a month on a S$22 basic wage with one to four hours of overtime a day. At his second stint, Jewel earned about S$1,100 a month on a S$23 basic wage with slightly longer overtime hours. He also reflected that the work regime during his second stint was relatively “harder” – it demanded greater physical effort from him and the job tasks were more complex. As he had paid over S$4,000 for his first stint and S$3,500 for his second, the latter seemed to be a more “profitable” stint. While Jewel was satisfied with his first stint (including remuneration) he was extremely discontented with his second. Specifically, he felt that earning S$1,100 a month during his second stint was insufficient because the pay did not reflect his competence and experience at welding and the physically demanding nature of the work. Other respondents I spoke to had similar views that rewards (wages) should reflect their perceived efforts especially if they perceived themselves as competent (“working understand”).
From the data collected, it does not seem that awareness of labour laws is a determinate factor in worker (dis)contentment. Most workers I have met become aware of what they call “MOM law” (i.e. labour laws) after about six to nine months on the job, mostly through interactions with other migrant workers. However, this awareness does not always correlate with their acceptance or rejection of wage pressures. For instance, workers are often displeased with wage deductions (such as deductions for food, lodging and utilities) that are legal under the Employment Act (Government of Singapore, 1968) while other workers (such as Shah Alam above) do not seem discontented that they are being paid under the statutory rates for rest-day work even though they are aware of labour laws.

In line with what many migrant-labour scholars point out, the concerns and constraints of individual migration projects mean that workers are often willing to tolerate harsh and physically demanding work regimes (Pinches, 2001: 187; Constable, 2007: 76-88, 193-201). Rahim’s assertion that he “must do any job” he is commanded to do (even those he did not expect) because of how much he has paid to get to Singapore, reflects the prevalent attitude of Bangladeshi migrant workers. Their migration projects, however, make appropriate rewards equally important as rewards-for-work-efforts are the means by which the former are accomplished. In this sense, it is the constraints of and concerns for their migration projects that make “low” or “no good” remuneration, which are the results of wage pressures, intolerable. The contentment of workers expressed in the 17 out of 97 stints do not necessarily reveal an absence of wage pressures or less vulnerable migration projects, but rather an effort-reward bargain that is perceived to be satisfactory for the accomplishment of migration objectives. Overwhelmingly (80 out of 97 stints), however, workers interviewed (as well as those observed at EW Construction), felt that the respective effort-reward bargains within particular work-stints required too much physical effort from them while undermining the success of their migration projects with too little rewards.

**The Politics of Obedience**

Despite overwhelming discontent over the effects of wage pressures, workers tend to obey orders on the basis of the personal authority of work superiors. During the interviews, workers often explain their obedience with “boss say, so must follow” or “must listen, because he is boss”. Workers tend to view employers, their functionaries
(engineers, project managers) and supervisors as people who “have power”, or varying degrees of it. Someone with “power” is one who can both punish and reward. Employers and managers have the “power” to determine remuneration and employment tenure, while supervisors exercise the “power” to deploy and direct workers on various job tasks.

This reflects a sense of class disempowerment among Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. Despite low levels of direct coercion in the workplace, workers (even the experienced ones) are acutely aware that they lack the “power” to openly challenge their employers on work conditions. Through their experiences at the worksite and their interactions with other migrant workers, they learn that there is little they can do to directly change the terms of their employment. Workers regard themselves as “power no have”, primarily because of their deportability (i.e. “can send back”) and the low status (waged and menial) of the work they do. They see others with resident rights (Singaporeans or permanent residents) as people who have more “power” because they do higher status work (“service” or “business”) and are not deportable. Work superiors, especially employers, become the closest and the most immediate manifestation of this “power”. When I directly queried discontented workers about how they acted upon their dissatisfaction over wage pressures, they often responded with “nothing can do” or “what to do?”

At the same time, Bangladeshi migrant workers feel that the success of a migration project necessarily depends on having a “good relationship” with people who “have power”, such as work superiors in their company. This view is reflected in a common saying among workers, which states that whichever worker wins the favour of his “boss” will successfully meet his migration objectives.

Every worker I interviewed seemed keen to meet, and sometimes exceed, the expectations of their work superiors in terms of the proficiency and timeliness of their work, especially in the first six to nine months of employment. They describe the usual pace and intensity of their work as “normal”, “natural” or “naturally fast”. They expend their efforts to the point of being “tired” but not to the point of exhaustion. At this intensity of work, they consciously attempt to demonstrate their obedience and

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45 “There is nothing I can do about it” and “What can I actually do?” In Bengali, they say “kichu korte pori na.” (কিছু করতে পারি না”) and “ami ki korte pori?” (“আমি কি করতে পারি?”) respectively.

46 Workers themselves often say something like, “If any worker boss like, then this man very good already”.

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competence to their work superiors. Workers’ ideas of what constitutes a “good worker” are based on these ideas of competence at work and obedience towards authority figures.

The tactical aspects of obedience

Here, I would like to emphasise the tactical aspect of worker obedience. Following de Certeau (1984), Sargeson (2001) understands “tactics” as “the manner in which the less powerful, at critical points in time, put systems of knowledge and management into use in ways not intended by their makers, with a view to subversion or carving out a space which they can manoeuvre in” (ibid: 54). Workers deliver obedient and competent work for two tactical reasons. Firstly, they do so to avoid open conflict with work superiors, which they believe they would definitely lose to the detriment of their migration projects. The workers I interviewed denied that this was done out of fear. Aside from those who eventually took to flight (15 out of 97 instances), none of the other respondents felt overtly threatened by punishment such as forced repatriation. While they were aware that they could be “sent back” or punished with salary deductions at any time, they did not believe that their employers would do so, at least if they avoided “fighting” with their work superiors. In fact, it was their tactical performance of obedience that gave them this sense of security. Workers felt that there was no way that “fighting with the boss” would accomplish anything for them as their employers had the “power” to do whatever they wanted with them. It would therefore be more constructive and beneficial for their migration projects to foster good relations with their work superiors. Secondly, workers deliver competent obedience to harness the perceived “power” of their work superiors in the hope of receiving better rewards for their efforts. They hope to get on good terms with work superiors in order to stand a good chance of receiving salary increments, preferential deployments (increased overtime hours, Sunday work, less demanding and better-paid deployments) and contract renewals which would protect or boost their earning capacity and tenure stability. This would, in turn, increase the prospect of being successful in their migration projects.

Despite claiming that there is nothing they can do about their grievances, workers tactically attempt to informally negotiate the terms of their obedience through the effort-reward bargain. Workers consciously present themselves to work superiors as men who “can do” (willing to work), “can follow” orders (obedient) and who are “idea good” or
“working understand” (competent and proficient) on a personal basis. They use their individual competence and obedience to attempt to justify informal requests to work superiors for increments, preferential deployments and contract renewals. These are highly individualised attempts by workers to informally renegotiate the effort-reward bargain by seeking either a decrease in their efforts at work (e.g. less physically demanding deployments) or an increase in the rewards (e.g. all the rest).

Workers often make use of every opportunity they encounter at work to informally sneak in a justifiable request or plea for better working conditions. As these negotiations are so informal and highly personalised, they can take place at any time when worker and work superior are face-to-face. Rasel told me how he once had the opportunity to prove his competence to his employer during his first stint in Singapore in an internal construction firm. One morning when his foreman was absent, his employer directly approached him to tell him that the carpentry materials (which Rasel was usually tasked to prepare) had to be ready and loaded up the lorry by 5pm. Rasel challenged his employer that he could complete the task by 3:30pm. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Rasel pushed himself harder at work to ensure that the parts were crafted according to the usual standards but in a shorter period of time. By the time his employer appeared at the workshop at 3:30pm, to his pleasant surprise, the finished materials had already been loaded up on the lorry. After he was praised for his work, Rasel took the opportunity to ask his employer for a raise to his basic daily wage (Interview, 11-11-2010).

Jewel, on his part, often stayed behind in the company workshop after working hours to practice and improve on his welding skills during his first six months of employment. His stated motivations were to impress his supervisor and to come across as someone who was just as, if not more, competent than the experienced welders in the company. Once he had successfully established himself as a “good welder”, he made informal requests to his supervisor to deploy him more regularly on Sundays (at double rate) and to recommend a wage increment for him to the boss (Interview, 08-01-2012).

Similarly, Iqbal started out being deployed to do the more manual and menial work during heavy-lifting operations, such as carrying out the chains to the riggers and removing debris from the work area. He consciously displayed obedience to the commands of his supervisor, allowing him to develop a good working relationship with
the latter. His supervisor also taught him more about lifting operations. Having established himself as a “good” and obedient worker, he asked his supervisor to recommend to management that he be trained and redeployed as a rigger/signalman. This would not only mean a higher basic salary, but also a less physically demanding work regime for him (Interview, 25-12-2011).

At the same time, workers also negotiate the manner in which work tasks are to be performed. As I mentioned earlier, work superiors command workers on what to do, when to do it, who to do it with, where to do it, how to do it and when it should be completed by. While on the job, workers attempt to renegotiate these terms of control in order to minimise or moderate the amount of effort and energy they expend at work. From the interviews and observations, I discovered that workers negotiate (i) work deadlines, (ii) who to do it with, (iii) the time when work tasks are to be done and, (iv) how a task is to be executed. I will go on to elaborate on the first two/three points.

In attempting to renegotiate deadlines, workers use various excuses, both genuine and fraudulent, to tell their immediate supervisors why the job cannot be completed on time. These excuses tend to centre on issues of the weather, the natural terrain, the number (and competence) of other workers deployed to the task and technical complications of the job. In order to be able to negotiate deadlines, individual workers need to have a reputation for being competent and obedient and also to demonstrate that they are “faithfully” working on the job and not skiving-off. At EW Construction, I observed that workers are often successful in pushing back task-completion deadlines given by their supervisors that have been handed down by the managing director. Workers often cite various technical complications of the bridges and pavements they are tasked to work on as well as insufficient workers deployed to the task (“man no enough”) as reasons for being unable to complete tasks on time. The reasons cited often seem genuine – the inconsistent gradients of some pavements and the unexpected discovery of reinforcing bars (rebars) in designated drill-spots on bridges mean that construction plans have to be redrawn and work delayed. What is significantly tactical about these negotiations is that workers utilise these delays to ease-up on work efforts when unsupervised while indulging in simulation (or pretend to be working) while the boss or

47 Commands on “what to do” and “where to do it” are perceived by workers to be non-negotiable. The former is considered to be things they “must do because boss say”. Any attempt to resist or negotiate this command would be a sign of overt insubordination and compromise their image as obedient. Workers also do not consider negotiating the location of work as it is often clients who decide that.

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supervisor is present on-site. This allows workers to demonstrate that delays were inevitable despite their best work efforts while, simultaneously, limiting their tiredness caused by work.

Closely related to deadlines are the number or identity of other workers that they are deployed to work with. Workers, as individuals, are concerned that sufficient numbers are deployed with them on a task so that they, individually, are not pushed to exhaustion. Contractors, on the other hand, strive for the efficiency of factor productivity of labour by deploying as few workers as possible. As I observed at EW Construction, workers lobby their immediate supervisors to try and get more men on the job, often claiming that it would be impossible to meet deadlines with existing numbers. I also discovered that workers who are comfortable with their existing work regime under a particular supervisor or foreman tend to resist redeployment to a different group. As workers establish themselves as competent and obedient in the eyes of their supervisor, a stable and comfortable effort-bargain is informally established. Redeployment would mean that the individual worker would have to expend more effort in attempting to similarly establish himself with the new supervisor. Several interview respondents, as well as most of the workers I encountered at EW Construction, informally petition their supervisors or employers to deploy them with favoured supervisors, foremen or co-workers. While workers desire a less demanding work regime, they often cite their competence and obedience as justification for their desired deployment (i.e. “pick me to work with you because I am a good worker”).

The success of workers in renegotiating the terms of control is largely contingent on the degree of supervisory autonomy from management. This means that supervisors, while an important intermediary of the managerial control work, do not exclusively represent the interests of management. Supervisors themselves also have an interest in having more workers at their disposal. This would allow them greater flexibility and leeway in coordinating and executing tasks. Having more workers does not necessarily mean the supervisor will oversee a quicker completion. What it means is that a supervisor does not have to drive his charges forward by attempting to intensify the pace of work or manually assisting them himself. The supervisor with more or sufficient workers at his disposal has more time to slack-off or attend to other work matters such as coordinating the movement of materials from workshop to sites.
Employer responses to informal negotiations

Employers and supervisors generally respond to informal attempts to negotiate the effort-reward bargain in one of two ways – through individualised concessions or avoidance. The former often consist of small wage increments and preferential deployments. For wage increments, employers either use their discretion to decide which individual worker gets how much of a pay-raise, or employers decide whether or not to implement a company-wide increment for experienced workers who are renewing their contracts. These basic wage increments tend to be fairly small – about one to three dollars increment to the daily basic wage. One of my respondents even pointed out that his most recent salary increment was an increase of 33 cents per day. Some of my respondents seemed content with these increments as they could entail an increase in monthly earnings of over a hundred dollars. Others felt that these small increments did not sufficiently reflect their level of competence and efforts at work. Preferential deployments usually come in the form of easier (less strenuous and “dirty”) and better-paid deployments and are usually meted out informally by employers and supervisors. Based on the interviews as well as my observations, employers and supervisors are often found to be willing to be flexible over work deadlines and personnel deployment, respectively. The interview data revealed that preferential deployments tend to be more common than salary increments as the former can be meted out informally and by supervisors through fairly quick face-to-face negotiations. It is important to note that concessions are often only limited to these two items as companies rarely increase overtime rates or restore salary deductions.

Just as regularly as providing concessions, employers and supervisors tend to ignore or avoid worker pleas for better working conditions. Requests are plainly answered by a simple “no”. Employers try to distance themselves from these requests with a “maybe”, “next time”, “see how”, or what one worker calls, “today, tomorrow” (i.e. “I will do it soon”). From the interviews, there are a few instances when employers were reported attempting to explain to workers why wage increments cannot be given out. These were rudimentary explanations of the company’s economic performance – “The company is not making money” or “The company can only afford a raise if we have more contracts” – and justifications do not go beyond these. Pleas to repeal regular deductions are almost always ignored. Employers and supervisors often reiterate that these are “company rules” and have to be followed. As I have mentioned earlier, these wage
pressure strategies are not actual rules. By citing non-existent “rules” or just making them up when workers ask for concessions, employers attempt to close-off the personal space for informal negotiation.

In avoiding the informal requests of workers, work superiors do not usually resort to threats. It seems they do not need to as long as workers do not take to insubordination, and the latter usually do not as they are often eager to avoid open conflict. For the same reason, work superiors rarely expend much effort trying to justify refusal to workers. Employers, by and large, expect workers to accept what they have been dealt with. At the same time, employers, constrained by their size and inability to enforce bureaucratic and technical forms of control, take advantage of worker obedience to direct daily work activities. Employers make individualised concessions or avoid worker pleas rather than resort to threats in order to avoid overt conflicts over wage pressures. In doing so, employers can continue to tap on the obedience of workers to keep production going.

*Failure and passive non-renewal*

When the obedience-for-rewards negotiation fails to pay off for workers during a particular work stint, they feel that they are unable to successfully harness the “power” of their work superiors to meet their migration objectives. Workers feel that this is because their relations with their work superiors are “not good”, for whatever reason or, more frequently, that their supervisors and employers are simply “no good” people. As workers feel a sense of disempowerment, they already feel it is usually pointless to agitate for better employment conditions against their employers.

In such a situation, workers feel that the next best thing to do would be to cut their losses by seeing out what has become an “unprofitable” stint in a congenial manner. Interviewees told me that it was important to “good good come, good good go” – i.e. to come and leave the company on good terms with their work superiors, no matter how dissatisfied they are with working conditions. While workers interviewed denied that they did this out of fear, they also expressed concern that open conflict with work superiors could result in them being blacklisted in Singapore and not being able to return in future. While the Ministry of Manpower often blacklists migrant workers who have been convicted of criminal offences, employer-blacklisting involves the employer making a complaint to the Ministry over a particular worker. The employer would often claim that a worker has “run away” (i.e. deserted the workplace or designated lodging).
or has displayed violent or aggressive behaviour. In terms of employer complaints, no conclusive evidence needs to be provided to the Ministry by the employer for the blacklisting to take effect. Furthermore, this is a unilateral process and there are no direct means for a migrant worker to challenge or contest his blacklisting. Workers I spoke to, however, say that they are not sure if their employers would blacklist them. They are nonetheless convinced that this happens in Singapore as they claim to have heard of such cases from their friends and it would be better for them if they left a “no good” company on fairly congenial terms.

Workers continue to maintain the appearance of obedience but resort to various forms of everyday resistance such as simulation and foot-dragging. Jabel told me that early in his stint he used to “good good working”, but after receiving no wage increment for two years, he decided to “slow slow working, when boss no have” (Interview, 11-11-2010). At this stage, workers see little point in trying to impress their work superiors and seek to minimize their work efforts while continuing to collect their monthly pay-checks. Yet, they find it important to keep their unhappiness and distrust of their employers under wraps. In this non-confrontational manner, discontented workers attempt to see out the remainder of their tenure and reconsolidate their migration projects by scouting for a “better company” for their next stint. They make plans to secure more loans back home and mobilise their contacts (friends and relatives) to be on the lookout for a “good company” to return to – one where work is not too “dirty” or strenuous, where there is sufficient work and overtime hours, where workers can receive a healthy monthly pay-check. For this to happen, they must avoid conflict with their existing employer so as not to run the risk of being blacklisted. In such cases of non-renewal, workers often report losses under S$2,000 and some even report marginal gains. The important thing for workers is to complete the one or two year stint without incident as premature repatriation or severe under-deployment (no jobs, no pay) would mean much heavier and unrecoverable losses. As subsequent migrations tend to cost less than the initial stint, and given the widespread availability of credit for labour migration in rural Bangladesh, second or third time migrants with small net losses do not encounter major obstacles in securing further loans to return to Singapore. With their contacts in Singapore on the lookout for a “better company”, the second or third migration is a more informed gamble.
None of this suggests that worker discontent does not explode into overtly contentious struggles in the workplace and beyond. Particular circumstances and incidents within the labour process can significantly disrupt the uneasy negotiation of obedience. Tensions in the workplace can be escalated when supervisors and bosses respond to worker negotiations by using intrusive supervision to intensify the pace of work. While workers usually try to tolerate intrusive supervision, those continually subjected to it may decide to confront their work superiors. The use of repatriation threats by work superiors may also trigger a confrontational reaction from workers who feel that their migration projects could be in immediate danger. Other specific employment circumstances such as work injuries, prolonged periods of unpaid wages and under-deployment as well as the intensification of wage pressures can also threaten the balance of obedience-based politics in the workplace.

In such circumstances, workers see that the “power” of their work superiors is being directly used against them. This is different from the circumstances of failure/passive non-renewal where workers feel they are unable to harness this “power”. While previously, workers might have understood the “power” of their work superiors as a constructive force (i.e. able to reward workers), they now see this same “power” as a destructive one that overtly threatens their migration projects and sometimes even their personal dignity and well-being. Workers, thus, take to overtly contentious forms of resistance in a mood of helplessness and desperation. This, again, is different from the sense of disempowerment that workers feel when they seek to informally negotiate the terms of their obedience. Overtly contentious resistance often takes the form of flight – desertion from the workplace and employer-provided lodging. Workers do so because they are no longer able to tactically use obedience within the labour process to defend the interests of their migration projects. As I will be elaborating on the practical logic and political significance of flight in Chapter Six, I will not fully chart out these details at this stage. What needs to be stated here, however, is that while overtly contentious struggles tend to appear as antithetical or contrasting to the politics of obedience, they almost always emanate from the latter. In fact, we can consider flight/desertion as one possible outcome of the politics of obedience.
The politics of obedience represents the prevalent form of class struggle among Bangladeshi migrant workers in the construction industry in Singapore. They involve workers acting on their discontent towards wage pressures by tactically using competent obedience to informally renegotiate the effort-reward bargain. These tactics tend to lead them to one of at least three conclusions, two of which I have illustrated so far: passive non-renewal and flight/desertion. As I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, both these outcomes have significant political entailments for the migrant labour regime in Singapore. For the rest of this chapter, however, I would like to explain why this politics of obedience comes to be the prevalent form of class struggle in the workplace.

**Explaining the Politics of Obedience**

In the above sections, I have shown that there is an enduring tension between the wage-pressure strategies of contractors and the migration objectives of workers. Wage pressures, implemented in the interest of maintaining profitability, are not objectionable to workers in themselves, but rather cause discontent among them because wage pressures undercut the effort-reward bargain. The latter is meant, from the workers’ point of view at least, to serve the interests of migration projects. At the same time, these tensions do not consistently translate into overtly contentious forms of struggle, such as flight/desertion. Out of the 97 stints documented from the interviews, 80 reflected significant and unresolved worker discontent over these wage pressures. However, only 15 of these stints actually involved overtly contentious forms of worker resistance such as flight/desertion.

The powerless political status of migrant workers, by itself, is insufficient to explain this phenomenon as structural coercion at the macro-political level has not translated into the prevalent use of direct coercion in the workplace. Also, the inhibitions posed by migration projects alone cannot explain why these workers generally try to avoid conflict and confrontation on the worksite. Yet, these factors are not entirely irrelevant to our analysis. From the outline above, structural coercion seems to translate into a sense of class disempowerment in workers rather than coercive control methods. Migration projects seem to both inhibit and motivate/facilitate certain kinds of worker resistance.

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48 The third conclusion would be that workers are content to work for their present employers. In 17 out of 97 stints, workers reflected eventual contentment – “not so good, but not bad” – with work and pay arrangements in the company. Only in five of these cases did workers actually feel the company in question was “very good”.

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strategies. In this section, I argue that it is the precise manner in which structural coercion and migration projects are situated within the dynamics of control in the labour process that explains the prevalence of this politics of obedience.

**The dynamics of control in the construction labour process**

Labour scholars such as Therborn (1983: 42) and Hutchison (2004: 17) have demonstrated that the “spatial concentration” of workers at one place increased the “class capacities” or collective agency of workers to act on managerial control at the point of production. The organisation of work in Singapore’s construction industry, however, often involves the dispersal of relatively small groups of workers along various points of production who move on to other points of production (sometimes in the same group, sometime with different co-workers) upon the completion of designated tasks. This means that there is rarely a sustained and prolonged concentration of construction workers at a given point of production. These arrangements, while not necessarily organised for this purpose, have the effect of undermining the collective agency of workers as it inhibits workers from consolidating their grievances and organising any sort of collective response. At the same time, these arrangements, coupled with the nature of supervisory arrangements, allow individual workers autonomy in regulating and negotiating the pace and intensity of work. This has the effect of curtailing worker agitation and defusing discontent within the labour process.

As I have shown earlier, there are frequent incidences of small-scale and fairly autonomous work deployments based on the division of labour of construction work and the prevalence of subcontracting in the industry. Even large construction projects – where one would expect a concentration of large numbers of workers at the point of production – involve several different contractors working on-site who deploy various small groups of workers/tradespeople at different times and at different production points at a sprawling site. Points of production can often be geographically dispersed as workers are deployed to work in small groups of two to seven. Upon the completion of designated tasks as defined by the division of labour in construction, workers move on to different sites, sometimes in the same group and sometimes redeployed with different co-workers. My interviews and observations also revealed that workshop deployments, like on-site ones, are not always permanent and rarely involve more than 30 workers at a given point of production.
The dispersed geography of production in the industry contributes towards workers’ sense of disempowerment. The absence of a critical mass of workers means that workers can rarely look at collective action as an option to remedy the grievances they face as individuals. Not only do they feel that, as individuals, they have “no power” to do anything about their circumstances, they do not see a collective mass who share their grievances. Many respondents reflected to me that while they were aware that their company’s workforce was much larger than the small groups they were deployed in, they were not completely sure if workers outside their groups shared similar grievances. Some firms have a very small number of employees, and workers experience their grievances as a collection of individual problems. Workers in relatively larger firms (over 100 workers) indicate that they rarely get to meet co-workers outside the small sections they are deployed in.

Different deployments within the same firm also mean that individual workers can face different work-related issues and grievances. Pay-rates, working hours, the level and nature of supervision and work intensity may often differ depending on the specific deployment. In such circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult for worker grievances to develop collectively. For instance, during a particular four-year stint, Habibur Rahman had at least three different deployments within the same firm. As a welder, he was first deployed to a building construction site where his company was contracted by the builder to construct particular steel structures. At work, he was constantly under the watch of a “strict” supervisor who did not allow his charges to take breaks outside the designated lunch and tea breaks and his overtime was strictly limited to two hours per day based on an agreement between his employer and the client. In his third year, he was deployed to conduct welding in the construction of a pier where his company was the main contractor and hence the formal occupier of the entire construction site. The work regime was considerably lax and his supervisor (a different one) often turned a blind eye to workers taking spontaneous breaks during working hours. His overtime hours during this deployment were also significantly higher; he clocked three to five hours of overtime a day. His final deployment of that stint was even more different – he was deployed to “follow” a project engineer to an isolated site-office where his only tasks were to open the site-office, fill the generator with diesel, turn it on/off and lock up the site-office while the company’s subcontractors performed earth-testing tasks. Needless to say, Habibur Rahman had very different feelings about
each deployment – he was extremely unhappy about the first, content with the second and saw the third deployment as a blessing (Interview, 17-11-2010). Different deployments mean that the effort-reward bargain under the same employer may vary. This has an effect of tapering worker grievances that arise from wage pressures.

While dispersed geographies of production and differential deployments are usually a consequence of prevalent subcontracting and the division of labour in construction work, some firms consciously use preferential redeployment as a means to mitigate worker discontent within the firm. Masood Rana told me that when he was working for a labour-supply firm, second-term workers were purposely supplied to better-paying clients or to do less “dirty” work. Workers deployed to these “better jobs” were also paid at a higher basic rate – S$18 per day rather than the usual S$17. This, according to Masood Rana, was to prevent discontent among second-term workers who would have had to pay S$2,000 to the employer for “renewal fees”. The redeployment of an entire batch of relatively seasoned workers to an “easier job” while deploying newcomers on the tougher ones allows for the dissipation of discontent among the former while discontent among the latter slowly starts to develop.

At the same time, the geographical dispersal of work deployments coupled with limited direct supervision or passive supervision allows individual workers greater autonomy to regulate the pace and intensity of their efforts. Experienced workers are able to take advantage of low levels of direct supervision to readjust the terms of obedience. Workers may choose to work faster and exceed the expectations of work superiors to prove their competence; they may choose to step-up their efforts during cooler parts of the day while slacking off during the mid-day hours; they may regulate their efforts based on the position of the sun and clouds; they may choose to work slowly and consistently with short regular breaks. And if workers choose to do so, it is even possible for some of them to work only when the supervisor or employer is present while slacking off for the rest of the time. Workers are often able to re-negotiate deadlines as long as they demonstrate progress in their work or provide justifications that their lack of progress was hampered by factors beyond their control, such as that materials provided were not of the correct specifications, the physical terrain prevented tasks from being completed in a routine manner, machine malfunction, etc. Based on the interviews as well as my own experiences at EW Construction, these come across as common and plausible excuses since many contractor firms can be run quite chaotically.
at times. One interviewee even told me that during a particular stint as a general worker, he spent most of his night-shifts napping in large iron pipes because supervision was so lax and work was so poorly coordinated (Interview, 26-04-2012).

These informal negotiations are also possible because, oftentimes, supervisors actively collaborate with workers to moderate the pace and intensity of work and justify failures to meet deadlines. Supervisory collaboration occurs because, in the construction industry, the supervisory class is relatively autonomous from the interests of management. In fact, through my own observations, I found supervisors attempting to balance the interests of workers and management. Supervisors are often migrant workers themselves and often subject to the same forms of powerlessness as those in the rank-and-file. Supervisors themselves almost always come from the rank-and-file, the only differences being that they are supposed to be highly experienced and competent and are salaried (rather than daily-rated) employees who are given formal authority to command and coordinate work. As powerless migrant workers, supervisors can also be subject to various wage pressures implemented by the firm and may share some of the workers’ discontent. In view of this, it is not surprising that workers are often able to negotiate the terms of control with their supervisors.

The point here is that the dispersed nature of production and supervisory arrangements allow workers the opportunity to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain. If, after proving their obedience and competence, they are unable to get more rewards, they may even take the liberty of working less hard. While this does not remove or resolve worker discontent, it certainly prevents it from boiling over into heated arguments. While they are still displeased about working conditions, workers can do something about it – shut up and pretend to work. The nature of production and supervisory arrangements certainly allows them an opportunity to do so. As the dispersed geography of production undermines the collective agency of workers in acting upon collective grievances, the resulting individual autonomy that workers have is significant in mitigating worker discontent.

*The manifestation and strategic application of coercion within the labour process*

The presence of structural coercion in the form of migrant worker powerlessness creates a sense of disempowerment among Bangladeshi migrant workers. Within the construction industry, direct coercion is used strategically and sparingly and in
combination with other non-intimidatory control strategies. It is particularly telling that explicit coercion is not used to get work out of workers even though workers constantly work under implicit threats. Together, these factors inhibit worker confrontation but, simultaneously, reward obedience from workers. As workers experience disempowerment within a fairly autonomous work regime where insubordination is often harshly punished while obedience can be rewarded, opportunities for confrontation are foreclosed while opportunities to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain are opened up.

At this point, a clear distinction needs to be made between employers’ use of coercion to direct and command work activities and their use of coercion to counteract worker resistance or dissent. The labour migration literature almost exclusively focuses on the latter – the presence of structural coercion allows employers to overcome or “beat down” overt forms of migrant worker contestations in the workplace (e.g. Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Mitchell, 1996; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Binford, 2009). This point is certainly true in our current context – my findings reveal that employers attempt to suppress the overt resistance and insubordination of workers with threats, blacklisting, forced repatriation and various forms of abuse. However, direct coercion is not the primary means by which employers command work. This is not due to employers’ incapacity to do so. Rather, this comes about because workers are constantly pre-empting direct coercion by offering their obedience. As I have shown earlier, workers deliver obedience in order to avoid open conflict with work superiors. Workers, well aware of their employers’ capacity for coercion, attempt to protect their migration projects by making it unnecessary for their employers to do so. Employers, on the other hand, can utilise the obedience-orientation of workers to direct work with less effort and complication.

Coercive or intimidatory strategies are used strategically across the industry in order to prevent or pre-empt worker agitation or contestation. Employers may use coercion at points where they struggle to command the obedience of workers or when they foresee worker insubordination to authority. These coercive strategies are usually meted out on an individual basis in order to deter other workers from withdrawing their obedience. While there are cases where work superiors use threats and abuses on the spur of the moment or out of frustration, direct coercion is usually delivered at specific moments, for specific purposes. In an interview with a former “human resource” manager of
“Firm X”\textsuperscript{49}, the respondent outlined how the company dealt with “problem”\textsuperscript{50} workers. First, the worker will be given a simple order by a work superior to “get in line”. If the worker does not comply with this order, the managing director or the respondent himself will approach the worker for “counselling”. At this point, the manager will attempt to find out what problems the worker is facing. During “counselling”, the manager makes an attempt to persuade the worker to do as he is told – “we tell the worker that he is here to make money for his family, and if he wants to continue doing this, he must know how to follow orders”. It is only when persuasion fails that this particular company rings up a repatriation company in order to forcefully repatriate the “problem” worker – “if they don’t want to listen, then they can go back to where they came from” (Interview, 10-01-2012). Direct coercion is not used indiscriminately; it is used strategically when obedience is not forthcoming from individual workers.

Because coercive strategies like forced repatriation and blacklisting are applied selectively and strategically by contractors across the industry, workers are well aware that any employer is capable of such acts even though they feel no impending danger at work. Through their experiences from previous stints and interactions with workers from other companies, workers are aware that their employers have these strategies at their disposal even though they may appear benevolent. Workers always want to avoid premature repatriation and blacklisting as these pose an immediate and direct threat to their migration projects. The former could leave them heavily in debt, besides exposing them to physical harm and indignation. The latter prevents them from returning to Singapore in the near future. Despite this, workers know they are “safe” as long as they do not confront their work superiors and, in attempting to say “safe”, workers tactically maintain the appearance of obedience.

At the same time, contractors also use several non-coercive or non-intimidatory strategies that intentionally or inadvertently mitigate tensions arising from the use of wage pressures. Some firms have an entrenched formal or informal benefits scheme which could include year-end, Lunar New Year or Eid/Hari Raya bonuses, yearly wage

\textsuperscript{49} “Firm X” is first mentioned in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{50} According to this respondent, “problem” workers were those who “don’t want to work”. To the company, these are workers who are often absent from work or take frequent medical leave. It is also worth noting that the respondent admits that workers on medical leave are often ordered to return to work at the discretion of management. “Problem workers” are also those who display insubordination to the orders of work superiors.
Increments, etc. Employers and supervisors also dish out various informal concessions to workers on an individual basis such as wage increments and preferential deployments. This strategic use of coercion to prevent worker agitation together with the implementation of informal or formal rewards schemes “invite” workers to informally negotiate the terms of obedience. It is particularly telling that in all of the 97 stints surveyed, every single respondent felt, at some point during the stint in question, that working conditions in the company could improve through the benevolence of their work superiors. If we consider the sense of disempowerment felt by workers and the relatively autonomous nature of work regimes together with the strategic combination of coercion and concessions, workers find it more sensible to negotiate obedience for rewards rather than to agitate against their exploitation.

Migration projects

From the data presented, we start to understand obedience as a tactic that is used to defend migration projects within the context of migrant-labour powerlessness. As the objectives of migration projects are undermined by the means to accomplish them, the success of these projects becomes dependent on extended tenure and strong earning capacity which are, in turn, constantly undermined by wage pressures in the workplace. The ability of workers to challenge these employer strategies is significantly limited by their political powerlessness and the strategic use of coercion in the workplace. At the same time, strategic concessions and autonomous work regimes give workers an opportunity to defend their projects. Tactical obedience, used to re-negotiate the effort-reward bargain, proves to be less risky than direct confrontation when wage pressures have to be challenged to protect migration projects. We can see now that the inhibitions of migration projects are not entirely prohibitive, but also have a constitutive effect on workplace struggles. While concern for their vulnerable projects plays a part in inhibiting workers from agitating for better working conditions, these same concerns (“money no enough”, “nothing to do”) make it necessary for workers to continually challenge the terms of their exploitation, albeit in an informal and non-confrontational manner. Tactical obedience thus represents the individual agency of workers in dealing with the way in which coercion and wage-pressures confront their immediate interests.

Furthermore, the fact that opportunities still exist for Bangladeshi migrant workers to reconsolidate their migration projects, coupled with the manner in which coercion is
manifested in the labour process, means that migration projects would be undermined less through passive non-renewal than by worker agitation to improve working conditions. In effect, opportunities for reconsolidation allow tensions between workers and their employers to be resolved outside the labour process and without overt contention.

Through the interviews, I observed that many of the workers responded to unsatisfactory earning capacity by choosing the passive option of tenure non-renewal. This means that workers either decline a contract renewal or choose to accept their employer’s decision to repatriate them at the end of the tenure. For one-term stints, workers often report losses of up to S$2,000. They would also need to cough-up another two to four thousand dollars to an informal recruiter for a new job where they believe they will be better rewarded for their efforts.

Their experiences in Singapore rarely destroy the myth of *bidesh* and, in fact, often strengthen their belief that migration projects are about luck – i.e. being “lucky” enough to find a benevolent employer. While their migration projects may not be accomplished in their present company, their relatively successful peers provide evidence that these objectives can still be accomplished within the wage-labour framework in Singapore. Workers believe, more strongly than ever, that it is their “luck” that determines whether they get a “good” or “bad” company.

Furthermore, the compulsions that migrant workers are faced with, as I have shown in Chapter Three, often mean that failure is not an option. Due to the wide availability of credit for migration in rural Bangladesh, reconsolidation certainly is one option, so long as returnees are not overwhelmed by debt upon return. When faced with an “unprofitable” stint, workers are often advised by friends and family to return home to start scouting for a better company. Workers in this situation often feel that they have little to gain from confronting their employers over their discontent. Due to the strategic use of coercion, workers are also concerned that confrontation with their employers may undermine their chances of securing future employment in Singapore since their employers have the “power” to blacklist them. Any significant obstacles faced to securing future employment in Singapore will exacerbate the problem of “nothing to do” (see Chapter Three). It is for these reasons that migrant workers at the end of their tenure believe that they need to leave the company on congenial terms and continue to
maintain the appearance of obedience to forward this tactical shift in their migration projects.

It is worth noting that workers who are in no position to reconsolidate their migration projects – most likely because of high levels of debt or premature repatriation – tend to be those who end up on the path of overtly contentious struggles such as flight/desertion. As I will demonstrate in Chapter Six, this does not necessarily mean that the inability of workers to reconsolidate their migration projects causes them to openly defy the authority of their employers. What I am pointing out is that migration projects can often cut both ways – while they may inhibit workers from resisting, their compulsions may also make it necessary for workers to resist. In this sense, the ability of many workers to reconsolidate failing projects is an important contributor to the politics of obedience.

When workers are unable to push the “frontier of control” through informal negotiations, the option of reconsolidation (if available to individual migrants) provides a realistic back-door to grievances over wage pressures. They have the option to pay to work for another company which, hopefully, will provide better working conditions. Within the context of their political powerlessness, the option of reconsolidation proves to be less dangerous for their migration projects compared to confrontation. However, the former also represents a retreat from the politics of production. It represents an attempt by workers to pursue their immediate interests outside the labour process. In effect, reconsolidation allows tensions between workers and contractors to be resolved without overt contention.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that the politics of obedience represents the prevalent form of workplace struggles between Bangladeshi migrant workers and construction contractors. Workers tactically demonstrate competent obedience to their work superiors in an attempt to informally re-negotiate the effort-reward bargain in order to defend the interests of their migration projects. Workers are reluctant to resort to confrontational politics despite enduring discontent over wage pressure strategies used by employers to protect profitability.
In seeking to account for the prevalence of this politics of obedience, I have shown that structural coercion and the inhibitions of migration projects, by themselves, cannot sufficiently explain worker obedience. Rather, I argue that it is the specific manner in which migrant worker powerlessness and migration projects intersect with and within the dynamics of control – i.e. the process by which employers set their workers to work – that explains how obedience as a tactic arises out these material circumstances. I discovered that the dispersed geography of production within the construction industry prevents a large concentration of workers at a given point of production for prolonged periods of time. This tends to inhibit workers from consolidating their grievances and developing a collective response. At the same time, the dispersion of production coupled with fairly autonomous supervisory arrangements allows workers to regulate their work efforts and re-negotiate the terms of work. Migrant worker powerlessness at a structural level tends to translate into a sense of class disempowerment at work. As workers experience disempowerment within a fairly autonomous work regime where employers strategically combine tactics of intimidation with individualised concessions, opportunities for confrontation are foreclosed while opportunities to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain are opened up. While the concerns of migration projects may inhibit workers from overtly confronting managerial control, these same concerns make it necessary for workers to continually contest the terms of control in a non-confrontational manner. Finally, the fact that many Bangladeshi workers have the opportunity to reconsolidate their migration projects means that worker discontent over wage pressures can be apolitically resolved or dissipated outside the labour process.

In the next two chapters, I seek to elucidate the dynamics and political consequences of two particular outcomes of the politics of obedience – passive non-renewal and flight.
Chapter Five

Labour Conflict and the Restoration of Obedience at EW Construction

In the previous chapter, I have shown that workplace struggles between Bangladeshi migrant workers and their employers take the form of a politics of obedience where workers tactically use obedience to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain. This is characterised by enduring tensions between wage pressures used by employers and the migration projects of workers within this bargain. I argued that workplace struggles take this form because of the precise manner in which structural coercion and workers’ migration projects are situated within the dynamics of control within the labour process. For the rest of this thesis, beginning with this chapter, I explore the links between these informal workplace struggles and more formalised struggles that seek to challenge the existing migrant labour regime. Specifically, I am concerned with the extent to which these informal struggles provide the impetus for more formalised struggles in the form of NGO advocacy and activism.

In this chapter, I illustrate how the politics of obedience is reproduced and evaluate the political consequences of its durability for the migrant labour regime. I start by positing that this form of production politics, while prevalent among Bangladeshi construction workers, is precarious because of its inherent tensions. Using a case study of the labour process in EW Construction, I demonstrate this precariousness by showing how wage-deductions for rain-stoppages undermine the existing politics of obedience which was premised on work-pacing – an informal form of output restriction among workers. A crisis of obedience came about when the intensification of rain-stoppages increased the intensity of work while significantly reducing monthly wages. This undermined the opportunities for workers to informally negotiate a satisfactory effort-reward bargain.

In using this case study to document a crisis of obedience, I highlight the role of work supervisors in making various forms of interventions in the labour process to restore obedience-based politics among workers. Supervisory interventions essentially involved three acts: (i) securing small concessions from the managing director (MD) such as extra overtime hours; (ii) direct interventions into the “game” of work pacing; and (iii) the reordering of the sequence of production. These measures had the combined effect of: (i) defusing worker outrage at critical junctures; (ii) making workers compete with one another for extra overtime hours; (iii) allowing workers to claw back earnings lost
to rain-stoppages; and (iv) making the work regime relatively less harsh for workers. This effectively allowed workers to, once again, use tactical obedience in order to win preferential deployments and/or conceal work pacing.

I argue that these forms of interventions were possible because, within many construction firms in Singapore, the supervisory class is given broad autonomy to direct production and have relatively autonomous interests from both workers and management. Within this particular context, it was in the interests of supervisors to counter worker insubordination and resistance by securing concessions from management, collaborating in work-pacing and re-ordering the production sequence rather than through punishment and coercion. These interventions in no way resolved existing worker grievances over low wages and harsh work regimes. Rather they ensured that these grievances were effectively depoliticised within the labour process – they did not develop into confrontational or contentious forms of production politics.

**The Politics of Obedience as Precarious**

On its part, the politics of obedience, as I have described in Chapter Four, contains latent and enduring tensions, which problematises its reproduction. These tensions are rarely properly resolved during workers’ tenures; my interviews and observations show that workers continue to voice dissatisfaction primarily over the use of wage pressures by their employers. The tense status-quo is further threatened when firms introduce new wage pressures or seek to intensify the work regime to enhance or protect profitability. As levy and dormitory rates continue to rise, contractors seek to protect their profits by instituting more wage pressures under the guise of “company rules”. Furthermore, ongoing wage-pressures and the inability of workers to significantly improve the effort-reward bargain may cause frustrations and discontent to simmer further. All these potentially lead to what I call a “crisis of obedience” – a situation within a firm where contractors struggle to obtain obedience from their workers.

In this chapter, I am concerned with how the politics of obedience is reproduced in spite of these tensions within it. In other words, how is obedience among Bangladeshi construction workers restored during a crisis of obedience in the workplace? While grievances over wage pressures and harsh working conditions constitute the basis of migrant worker resistance, these grievances do not directly and unproblematically
translate into open contentious struggles. There is therefore a need to explain how and why these tensions come to be resolved, dissipated or mediated within the labour process; and (as the following chapter will address) how these tensions and grievances escalate into more contentious forms of conflict.

I have shown in Chapter Four that the politics of obedience represents the prevalent form of class struggle between Bangladeshi construction workers and their employers in Singapore. The key to understanding its continual reproduction, in spite of its tensions, is to study how a crisis of obedience is resolved within the labour process. At the same time, I want to draw out the political implications that a durable politics of obedience has for the migrant labour regime in Singapore. The key here is to look more closely at certain forms of everyday resistances that workers engage in and to ask: how are these resistances – such as work-pacing – kept within the politics of obedience and why do they not develop into more overt and organised forms of struggles that potentially challenge the existing migrant labour regime? In short, this chapter seeks to answer these two questions:

(i) When does obedience tend to break down and how is it restored within the labour process?

(ii) What implications does such an outcome (i.e. the restoration of obedience within the labour process) hold for the migrant labour regime in Singapore?

In addressing these questions, I use a four-and-a-half month participant observation stint at EW Construction to show how worker discontent over and informal resistance to newly instituted wage-deductions were dissipated through supervisory intervention. I illustrate pre-existing worker discontent towards working conditions and detail how they addressed their grievances through the obedience-based politics of work-pacing. I then show how intensive rain-stoppages over a period of a month led to a crisis of obedience which, in turn, led to worker outrage and insubordination. I proceed to detail the specific interventions made by supervisors and the effect these measures had on the workers and their workplace politics. I subsequently explain the idea of supervisory autonomy in order to explain how these interventions were possible. Finally, I end the chapter by reflecting on the political implications of the perpetuation of obedience-based production politics involving Bangladeshi migrant workers.
The Case Study: EW Construction

EW Construction is a medium-sized construction firm with a workforce of around 200 workers. The firm is headed by a managing director who is also the largest shareholder. The company used to be involved in building construction and piling workers but has since shifted its operations to smaller-scale civil engineering works. About half the company’s workforce is deployed to work on a government project to construct shelters/covered walkways over a series of pedestrian bridges and pavements around the island and it is the labour process within this project that I will be focusing on. The 100-over semi-skilled workers deployed to this project (which is ongoing at the time of writing) are divided by trades into five groups of between 15 and 25 workers each – two groups of steel fitters; two groups of concrete workers; and a group of scaffolders and painters – helmed by supervisors who wield considerable personal authority over their charges. Workers work onsite (i.e. on bridges) or in the company workshop in smaller sections (of three to seven) led by a foreman who has very limited formal or personal authority. While group deployments are determined by the managing director and are usually permanent, sectional deployments are ad hoc and determined by the respective supervisor.

Workers are deployed to work on various worksites across the island as well as in the small un-automated company workshop. Supervisory control is usually punctuated as worksites are often spread across the island and supervisors are concurrently involved with coordinating the movement of materials and workers between different locations. Workers are also surveilled by the client’s clerk-of-works and safety inspector and the managing director, who periodically visit each worksite. At the workshop, surveillance cameras watch workers’ every move but only to the edges of the shop floor. The amount of surveillance workers come under varies from day to day and is largely contingent on the stage of completion of work and the production priorities of the individual supervisor.

51 This is relatively large compared to most construction firms in Singapore.
52 At EW Construction, foremen are basically leading hands.
53 Onsite surveillance by supervisors, clients and the managing director tends to occur least often at the very beginning (i.e. marking out the bridge and drilling holes) and at the very end (i.e. remedial tasks after all welding is complete) of construction on each bridge/walkway.
The division of control

While I will not go into a detailed technical description of the labour process at EW Construction, there are several important aspects of the labour process that warrant highlighting. Firstly, the company utilises a form of direct control over workers where there is a division of control between the managing director (i.e. “the boss”) and his five supervisors. These supervisors – two Singaporeans, one Tamil-Indian, one Bangladeshi and one Burmese – are given considerable authority, autonomy and responsibility to direct production. The managing director determines the rewards (wage rates, increments), punishments (deductions, etc.) and other terms of employment (who to hire, contract renewals, terminations) as well as what work is to be done and by when. Supervisors are tasked with the responsibility of getting the job done under these broad stipulations. The managing director provides the supervisors with workers, tools, materials, worksites and deadlines. It is the responsibility of supervisors, in coordination with one another, to figure out how they are going to complete the job and set their charges to work as there are no formal work schedules. The managing directors give supervisors the authority and autonomy to determine work direction. This division of control over work means the supervisors, rather than technical or bureaucratic procedures, are tasked with deciding how work is to be obtained from workers (cf. Friedman, 1977; Edwards, 1979). Managers (including the production manager and engineers) within the company are largely restricted to assisting the managing director with technical (conception) and business (e.g. tenders) aspects of the company’s activities rather than being directly concerned with production.

This arrangement – which is quite common for medium-sized to large contractor firms in Singapore – is different from more bureaucratic forms of control where rules and work procedures are designed by management and passed down for supervisors to enforce at the point of production (cf. Edwards, 1979). It is also distinct from the form of direct control used by very small contractor firms in Singapore, where the contractor himself has considerable input in directing daily production activities in addition to determining the terms of employment. In much larger contractor firms, authority and responsibility over production is passed down through an additional level of management – from the managing director to the production manager and then to the supervisors in a similar fashion. This division of control over work is particularly significant for understanding the class interests of supervisors during the crisis of
obedience and the way in which they were able to make particular interventions to address this crisis.

*Labour productivity pressures*

The second important aspect of the labour process in EW Construction is that there is a noticeable lack of productivity pressures on supervisors. The key to EW Construction’s profitability does not depend as much on increasing the factor productivity of labour by driving workers harder but by keeping wage costs as low as possible. In other words, the company’s primary strategy of profitability is one of low wages, rather than innovation or raising skill levels. The company’s shift from building construction and piling workers to smaller-scale projects reflects an attempt to exploit the better profit margins from the latter. Piling and building works had entailed using expensive machines and paying trained machine operators and riggers over S$24 a day. On the other hand, constructing covered walkways involved using cheaper machines and a more disposable labour force on an average of less than S$20 a day. The company’s wage bill is also kept down by several wage pressures such as stagnating wages and several wage deductions. All these mean that the managing director, like most contractors in Singapore, *primarily* maintains or enhances profitability by keeping wages low rather than exerting productivity pressures upon the workforce.

At the same time, the completion deadlines set by the clients (a government statutory board) can often be negotiated. Two representatives from the client – the safety inspector and the clerk-of-works – visit every worksite daily to monitor the progress of construction. While this is a form of surveillance over workers, it also allows supervisors (in charge of organising and directing production) to freely interact with the client’s representatives. As I will demonstrate later in the section on work pacing, this allows supervisors to informally negotiate deadlines based on “unforeseen” or “uncontrollable” circumstances. When on site, the clerk-of-works and the safety inspector are able to witness first-hand the issues that prevent timely completion. The relative absence of productivity pressures becomes particularly significant when considering the extent to which workers and supervisors can influence the effort-reward bargain by limiting the intensity of the daily work regime.
Workers of different nationalities

The final significant, but somewhat separate, aspect of the company to highlight here is that the labour force is rather diverse by nationality. Out of the 200-odd workers employed, around 90 are Tamil-Indian, about 60 are Bangladeshis, and 30 are Punjabi-Indian. Burmese workers number just under 20 while there are one or two Thai workers as well. While my research primarily focuses on the Bangladeshi workers, the diversity of the workforce raises questions relating to potential solidarity and divisions among workers. In the labour process, the Bangladeshi workers I study not only have to interact with supervisory control but also with their co-workers of different nationalities.

Based on conversations with my co-workers and my prior experiences working for a local migrant worker NGO, I discovered that the South Asian workers tended to have somewhat similar migration projects. The Bangladeshis, Tamils and Punjabis all tend to come from rural “middle” families and had incurred similar amounts of debt out of similar recruitment systems. However, I could not ascertain if Tamil and Punjabi workers (or even the Burmese workers) faced the same level of social expectations of migration within their village communities.

Another significant factor was that all workers were treated equally both by the managing director and their respective supervisors. When I was hired, the managing director found it important enough to tell me that “all workers are the same” and that “English is spoken at work”. I soon noticed that the Indian, Bangladeshi and Burmese supervisor tended to avoid favouritism towards “their own kind”. All workers were brought in on work permits, which made them equally politically powerless in Singapore. They were all on the same (stagnant) pay-scale and there was no division of labour by nationality as workers were (fairly) equally distributed among the groups.

I also noticed that almost all the workers (aside from the Thais who seemed to do as they please) took to obedience-based politics but with some differences. The Tamils and Bangladeshis tended to emphasise deference; Punjabi workers tended to display less

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54 Workers of different nationalities communicate with each other and their work superiors through a common language which I call “site English”, “Site English”, which is commonly used in the construction sites and shipyards in Singapore, is a pidgin language which is mostly based on the informal variety of Singaporean English.
deference but play up their physical strength. Nonetheless all of them (including the Burmese) stressed the importance of competence at work (i.e. “idea good”).

During my time at EW Construction, I found it hard to tell if this diversity of origin created divisions or solidarity among these different groups of workers. I observed both quarrels and solidarity between and within groups. I also noticed that friendships and solidarity (i.e. supporting a co-worker during a quarrel) between workers were based more often on age rather than on nationality.

**Existing Worker Discontent: “Man can up, money no up” and “All time body down”**

Like the respondents interviewed in Chapter Four, all the workers here (regardless of nationality or deployment) felt that their jobs required too much effort from them while constantly short-changing them in terms of rewards, which they felt was an obstacle to successful migration. Workers are unhappy that pay-rates do not reflect the “hard” and “heavy” nature of their jobs, which make them “all time body down” (i.e. perpetually exhausted). The work regime at EW Construction is extremely physically demanding for workers of all trades. For steel workers, the repeated manual lifting and fitting of columns and angle-bars up the bridge is the most physically strenuous of all tasks. The perceived discrepancy between the physical demands of their job and a low basic wage is expressed in quasi-monetary terms. When workers are exhausted from continuously carrying steel up a bridge, they openly declare to one another that “twenty-dollar salary finish, now free working!” This means that the heavy lifting has “worked-off” the value of their basic daily pay and any more work for the rest of the day would constitute unpaid labour. By attempting to humorously quantify their wages in terms of work-efforts and physical strain, workers display an acute awareness that their efforts are being undercut by low wages. However, workers are not unhappy with “hard labour” per se, just the way their “hard labour” is rewarded. While workers do take some pride in being “strong” and “tough”, they feel that the physical demands of their respective jobs are not suitably compensated by the wages they earn.

Workers feel that low and stagnant wages do not reflect their competence. Many workers declare that in EW Construction, “man can up, but money no up” to indicate that while competent workers often get promoted to foremen, their wages remain stagnant or low. Workers can get promoted to foreman easily if they are competent and
can read drawing plans. However, workers are only offered increments upon the renewal of their one-year contracts. Furthermore, workers find these increments of S$2 per day to their basic wage extremely minute and not sufficient given their added responsibilities as foremen.

Workers feel that their monthly earnings of S$700-800 a month is insufficient for them to accomplish their migration projects. They feel their monthly earnings are “little bit” or low because it will effectively take first-term workers ten months to cover their initial outlay or loan. The company does not take kickbacks for renewal and almost always offers existing workers renewals so workers only start making a “profit” from their second year. Despite their relatively secure tenure (because there are many jobs at the company for now), experienced workers are quite demoralised at having to do such heavy work for so little social “progress” back home. Like many of the workers interviewed in Chapter Four, these workers feel pessimistic about their migration projects being accomplished within this company.

Workers believe that the cause of their grievances is the miserliness of “the boss” and his “office people” who determine their pay and working hours. These people not only keep their basic pay low but also limit their overtime hours to two hours a day and make deductions to the wages of their colleagues who are housed on the workshop premises.

At the same time, many workers realise things can be much worse in other companies. They are consoled by the fact that there are actually many jobs at the company, which means that their tenure and earning capacity (although low) is stable and secure. Many workers feel fortunate that paid working hours also include the time they spend being transported to and from worksites. Several workers had earlier stints (especially in labour supply companies), where they were only paid for the hours they actually spent working on-site. This meant they could spend over two unpaid hours every day on the road. They are therefore relieved that this does not happen at EW Construction. Despite these consolations, almost all the workers generally were dissatisfied with conditions in the company.

The Politics of Obedience and Work Pacing

Like their compatriots in Chapter Four, the workers of EW Construction tend to display competent obedience at work despite these dissatisfactions. Likewise, tactical obedience
is used by workers to avoid open conflict with work superiors and to harness better rewards for their efforts. However, their efforts to influence the effort-reward bargain through obedience were somewhat unsuccessful. While workers tend to have good relations with their supervisors and are rather successful in securing preferential deployments (relative freedom in picking their own sections within work groups), they fail to gain a meaningful increase in overtime hours or attain better pay and increments.

Despite the failure of their obedience politics to secure them better rewards, workers do not immediately withdraw their obedience. Workers seem to be starkly aware of their occupational immobility (they cannot change employers without cost to them) and deportability. At the same time, workers are aware that, despite their deportability, they are not in any danger of being repatriated against their will so long as they maintain the appearance of obedience. Supervisors don’t usually threaten workers with repatriation and neither does the boss (who never speaks to workers directly). However, workers are conscious that they were brought in to work and, as work permit holders, could still be repatriated on the whims of the boss. Their caution over their deportability is not so much informed by their experiences within EW Construction, but from the stories they hear from their “friends” (also work permit holders) who have had bad experiences with their respective employers.

Dissatisfied with the existing effort-reward bargain and faced with the inability to influence rewards through obedience, workers attempt to influence the only thing they can – their efforts. If they are unable to change “money no up”, they are still able to use the facade of obedience to ensure that they and their co-workers will not be “body down” because of their work. Their everyday workplace resistance, thus, takes the form of work pacing. This is effectively an informal form of output restriction that involves simulation and varying the physical expenditure of labour according to periods of surveillance and non-surveillance.

Work pacing is not entirely covert nor is it completely dis- or unorganised. It is organised in a fairly opportunistic manner by foremen and senior workers from the rank-and-file and revolves around several unspoken principles: the intensification of work and simulation during periods of surveillance to demonstrate that workers are working hard; the conservation of workers’ physical energies during periods of low or non-surveillance through informally coordinated slow-downs; active demonstration by
workers to supervisors that work has been performed during periods of non-surveillance; and constant attempts by workers and supervisors to justify late completion (to the boss and clients) or extra overtime hours (to the boss).

*Periods of surveillance and non-surveillance*

During periods of surveillance by supervisors, the MD and clients, workers made conscious attempts to “faster faster working” – either to appear “on the ball” or to actually intensify the pace of work. When workers were being watched by the surveillance camera, the MD or the clients, they consciously demonstrated that they are working hard. Idling in front of the MD or the clients will result in a reprimand for the supervisor and a small fine for the entire section as well as the supervisor – S$20 for workers, S$50 for foremen and supervisors. This is why workers do not remain idle during periods of surveillance even when they are not required to perform a task at that moment. The simulation of work is just as important as the actual performance of work and it is often the foremen (and sometimes even supervisors) who quickly organise simulation during these periods. When the MD visited the worksite, it suddenly took six workers to weld two angle-bars together when three or four would usually be sufficient. Here, it is the foreman who organises the idle workers into a task that does not usually require their labour – an extra worker to prop-up the raised working platform, an extra worker to hold on to the angle-bar being welded, an idle worker to go fetch some tools for the foreman (which he may not even need). At the workshop, the supervisor who fiercely reprimands an inexperienced worker in view of the camera for not working buys the same worker some tea in the evening and reminds him never to put his hands on his hips while he is in view of the camera. Supervisors, foremen and experienced workers often guide and instruct inexperienced workers and one another during periods of surveillance to ensure that the entire section appears to be working.

During periods of non-surveillance, workers considerably ease-up on their efforts. This aspect of work pacing is called “slow slow working” as workers, within their sections, intentionally slow down the pace and intensity of work by consciously restricting the amount of energy they expend on designated work tasks. Again, this is opportunistically and informally coordinated by both foremen and supervisors, but in different ways. When the supervisors leaves the site (and the clients and MD are not around), the
foremen and experienced workers instantly drop the pace of work – they work in a leisurely manner and take long and frequent pauses between tasks.

**Opportunities for slow-downs**

For the steel fitters, opportunities for slow-downs appear at different times of the day during different stages of production. Foremen and experienced workers are aware of these opportunities and use them to effectively coordinate a leisurely work regime. They look out for signs of exhaustion among co-workers and instruct them to slow down; they informally reinstitute the 3pm tea-break which had long since been repealed by management; they informally agree upon “easy” and comfortable production targets with their co-workers. The key here is that workers attempt to stretch time while keeping completed work tasks to the minimum. A supervisor may instruct the section to erect five columns by the end of the day. His charges may realise that the task could be completed by lunchtime or by 2pm at the very latest. They are also aware that if they do complete it by 2pm, there would not be anything left to do on that site for the rest of the day and hence, they may be redeployed to help out another section or work at the workshop. Rather than doing any of that, the foreman slows down the pace of work to the extent that only four columns are erected by just before 6pm (the lorry arrives to pick workers up at around 6 or 6:15pm). This would leave the section just enough time to pack up. It is certainly not the case that workers totally “switch-off” during periods of non-surveillance – workers feel they have to work, and that they have to work slowly. During these periods, workers are constantly on the lookout for sudden and/or unexpected appearances of the MD (very rare, but the most dangerous), their supervisor (just don’t let him see you doing nothing) the clerk-of-works (frequent, but not malevolent) and the safety inspector (very frequent and very dangerous) as they cannot be seen to be idling during working hours. Workers, thus, go-slow in a way that will minimise both their physical efforts and the potential amount of work designated to them as well as to protect themselves from the sudden intrusions of supervision and surveillance.

Workers from the concrete and scaffold/painters groups pace their work in slightly different ways based on the physical nature of their jobs. The concrete workers sat hunched in small groups for almost half the working day as they were engaged in informal banter while pretending to be shaping rebars. Scaffolders and painters have
considerably less leeway for work pacing as their job scope is relatively narrow – i.e. fix the scaffolding or paint the finished columns and angle-bars. However, scaffolders often engaged in simulation by remaining on the scaffold after it had been erected while pretending to be tightening the swivels.

The role of supervisors

Supervisors, for their part, give silent consent to work pacing – they tend to prioritise each worksite under their charge and spend more time at sites where work has to be completed more urgently. This prioritisation of sites is a direct entailment of punctuated supervision since supervisors are unable to be at every point of production at the same time while coordinating the movement of materials and production sequences with other supervisors as well as liaising with the client’s representatives. Supervisors are aware that workers slow down once they are unsupervised and expect workers to complete less work than what was designated to them. They thus have to execute punctuated supervision in line with their own production priorities.

Supervisors also have some empathy for their charges – they understand the physically demanding nature of the job since, at times, supervisors themselves chip-in to help workers with tasks. My supervisor, Aung, often told me that while work was hard, workers still ought to do some work and he was often confident they would do just enough while unsupervised. At the same time, supervisors themselves have to avoid conflict with the boss as they will be the ones reprimanded if work progresses slowly. Supervisors often seem to know where and when work can be sped up and they use their mere presence on-site (sometimes urging the workers on and even helping them) to speed things up. Whether individual supervisors personally support work pacing or otherwise, they are aware that it is unfeasible to constantly supervise workers and have to deal with repercussions from the MD if workers are found to be idling. As such, supervisors often have to decide how much time to spend at each site and tend to prioritise sites where work needs to be sped up.

Justifying delayed completion

Inevitably, because of work pacing, projects are almost always not completed on time. This is of issue to both the managing director and the client (clerk-of-works and safety inspector). At the same time, the MD has not taken punitive measures against workers
nor has the client done the same to the company because of delayed completion. An important aspect of work pacing involves workers and supervisors justifying completion delays by drawing the attention of management and the client to factors beyond their control. The most common (and useful) justification used by workers and their supervisors to justify late completion is that the physical terrain or the existing built-up environment prevented work from being carried out according to plan. For example, when one particular site (bridge and linkway) took almost four months to complete (similar projects take just over one month), the steel fitters (through their supervisor) argued that the inconsistency of the existing pavement’s gradient made it practically impossible for them to construct according to plan. The workers claimed that they had to constantly improvise on measurements during erection of columns and the fitting of angle-bars, which is why they took longer than expected. On other sites, workers often cite the obstruction of rebars when drilling holes in the bridge which, again, mean that work cannot be carried out according to plan.

While these “excuses” are not fraudulent, they are hardly exceptional circumstances – anyone would hit a rebar when drilling holes into a bridge because a bridge is made up of rebars! The point here is that workers constantly use technical factors inherent in their work as opportunities to conceal the pace of their work. They use these to justify their tardiness to their supervisors who, in turn, use these same reasons (which have just been brought to their attention) to justify delays to the MD and the client. On-site, I have often seen my supervisor “forewarn” the clerk-of-works and the safety inspector that while the drilling of holes and the subsequent fitting of metal-plates can take less than a week, it would take more than a week if “we drill into rebars”.

In short, work pacing involves workers restricting the expenditure of labour (and hence output) during periods of non-surveillance while constantly maintaining the appearance that they are hard at work. Work pacing effectively allows workers to mitigate what they feel is both an unfair and unhelpful (for their migration objectives) effort-reward bargain by allowing them to significantly reduce their work-efforts during periods of low or non-surveillance. For the workers, work pacing is a relatively safe way for them to defy “the boss and his office people” (i.e. management) without open confrontation. More importantly, work pacing effectively allows workers to maintain the appearance of obedience while somewhat addressing their discontent. Workers’ ability to work pace
means that the politics of obedience does not collapse despite failure to solicit better rewards.

**Rainy Days and the Crisis of Obedience**

Salary deductions due to rain-stoppages, which significantly came into effect during my second and third month at work, had the effect of disrupting the tense labour stability within the company. Salary deductions for rain-stoppages had already been instituted by the managing director about six months before I joined the company. For every hour that work on-site had to be halted due to heavy rain (workers often worked in the drizzle), half an hour would be deducted from each worker’s time sheets. Deductions for rain-stoppages are a form of indirect wage pressures aimed at reducing the monthly wage-bill while (more crucially) improving the factor-productivity of labour by eliminating some non-productive labour-time from the company’s payroll. From my interviews with other Bangladeshi workers, I gathered that within the construction industry such deductions are rather rare as workers are usually expected to continue working in the rain despite the safety hazards. However, much of the work involving the construction of sheltered walkways cannot actually be done in heavy rain. Tasks such as welding cannot even be done when the work surface is extremely wet or flooded. During heavy rains, workers are actually compelled to stop work as they are unable to weld or fit angle-bars. Management uses this opportunity to claw-back some losses in productivity to lighten the company payroll. Needless to say, this move was never well received by any of the workers as, unlike fines for slacking-off or non-conformity to safety protocol, workers themselves had no control over weather conditions. Furthermore, workers are not usually free to do whatever they wanted during these stoppages; they are expected to wait on-site.

Supervisors, who keep a monthly record of their charges’ working hours, are responsible for reporting rain-stoppages to the managing director. Supervisors, whose salaries were not directly affected by these deductions, initially represented workers’ concerns by verbally petitioning the managing director to repeal these deductions. Supervisors greatly empathised with workers over this matter but had to accept the MD’s response that these were “company rules”. Upon failing to repeal these deductions, some supervisors individually proceeded to intentionally fail to report rain
stoppages. However, the MD soon found out and started to record rain-stoppages on his own.

The rain-stoppages in June caused much resentment among workers for two reasons. Firstly, their monthly earnings were significantly reduced. As things stood, most workers received S$700-$800 a month. They would often set aside around S$200 for their own monthly expenses in Singapore while the remaining S$500-S$600 would be remitted to service their debts, meet family expenses (e.g. private school fees for their children or siblings) and savings (e.g. to build a new house). Workers were already unhappy that their monthly earnings of S$700-$800 did not allow them to make a significant or useful amount of savings for their families’ future. A hundred-dollar drop in earnings would further compromise the success of their projects, something they had already been rather pessimistic about before the June deductions.

Secondly, rain-stoppages disrupted workers’ work pacing which, in turn, made the working day more demanding, stressful and unpleasant for them. These stoppages, which occurred up to ten hours a week, effectively jeopardised opportunities for work pacing as workers were deprived of the autonomy to informally re-organise their designated work-tasks during periods of non-surveillance. Rather than working in a casual and measured fashion for a low basic rate while the supervisor was away, workers ended up having to rush through tasks before the rains got heavier and had to endure extremely unpleasant physical conditions for only half their hourly pay. As the rain disrupted the casual pace of work, workers had additional tasks to perform. They had to rush up and down the bridge in the rain to bring down their work materials (extremely heavy steel columns, beams and angle-bars) and tools (heavy welding-gear and grinding machines with extremely long wires) which had to be stored under the bridge and covered with plastic sheets. Workers had to ensure that the generators and welding machines were also covered. During rain-stoppages, workers had to endure unpleasant conditions as they tried to find shelter. They sought shelter at nearby bus stops, under the bridge or under parts of the covered walkways which had been fully constructed. Unfortunately, none of these spots provided proper cover from heavy and prolonged rains – workers inevitably got wet and were unable to even get a proper rest during rain-stoppages.
To make matters worse, workers had even more tasks to do during rainy periods. The client’s safety inspector ordered the workers to ensure that puddles of stagnant water were entirely eliminated from the worksite. Workers had to constantly fill up the small but numerous column footings (a 10-mm deep constructed gap in the pavement in which steel plates were fitted and columns erected upon) with sand to prevent water from collecting there. Workers then had to empty the sand in these gaps every morning and dry the inside of the footing before welding could resume. Workers had to fill and empty the sand using their hands as they did not have any suitable tools for that purpose. The constantly wet working surfaces during this period made the routine welding of columns and angle-bars slow, tiresome and even dangerous. Wet steel meant that workers had to work more carefully and less casually to prevent the risk of slips during fitting. These extra tasks that workers were commanded to do during rain-stoppages were not even recognised as “work” – workers were still evaluated on the number of columns, steel plates, angle-bars and beams they erected and not for the remedial work they had to do during rain-stoppages. These conditions effectively meant that not only were workers unable to pace their work to their comfort, they had to put in more effort for less pay. To top it all off, workers were ferried to and from worksites in open-top lorries with only plastic sheets for shelter.

Needless to say, there seemed to be overwhelming outrage among workers at the “boss and his office people” over these “company rules” regarding rain-stoppages. When workers discovered a significant drop in their June wages, cynicism towards the company turned into outrage. I noted that workers of all trades and nationalities (aside from the Burmese, who were unhappy but seemingly less vocal) were openly voicing their disapproval over June’s wages to their respective supervisors. At this point, the supervisors told them that they had tried their best but were unable to get the MD to compromise on “company rules”. At the worksite, workers, among themselves but in the presence of supervisors, were becoming increasingly vocal about their unhappiness as some started exclaiming “Cheebye55 company lah! Don’t want working!” Several workers56 from my steel group and the two concrete groups openly told their respective supervisors that they no longer felt like doing any work (but not that they were

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55 A common swear-word used in Singapore, of Hokkien-Chinese origin.

56 It was mostly the foremen and some of the more experienced workers although a couple of workers with less than a year’s experience joined in as well.
They insisted that they “must” always do as the supervisors say but they have to be paid in a “correct” manner – which meant no wage-deductions for rain-stoppages. The supervisors replied that pay matters were outside their control as their job was only to report working hours to “the office”.

As these informal discussions, which took place at the worksite, reached an impasse, some of these workers started silently walking off the job. Whenever a designated work task did not require them to work in a group, some workers would individually take off their safety helmet and safety vest and simply walk off the job and out of the worksite only to return an hour or two later. Walking off the job was spontaneous and unspoken and workers would even do it during periods of surveillance. Workers became bolder about this and, almost every day, one worker or another from my group and the concrete groups would walk off the job for one to two hours.

Soon enough, the supervisors started getting irked with this behaviour. One day our supervisor caught us idling on the bridge and asked us why we were not working. We replied that we could not do any of the tasks at hand because we didn’t know where our welder (Rony) had gone. Half an hour later, Rony arrived back at the worksite with two mangoes he had stolen from someone’s tree. Clearly irked and frustrated, the supervisor asked him where he had been and he replied that he was in the toilet for a long while because he was not feeling too good. When our supervisor told him never to walk off the job again, Rony simply replied that his tummy would feel much better if the company paid him properly.

As workers continued to silently walk off the job, supervisors struggled to control their charges as obedience became less forthcoming from the workers. Workers, unhappy with June’s pay and the new “wet” work regime, started openly questioning supervisory orders. In the two weeks from the last payday, two workers, Mintoo and Selim (both Bangladeshi), from my steel group had open (but separate) arguments with the supervisor over their sectional deployments. These two workers had refused to follow the supervisor’s orders to be deployed with the Tamil foreman, Raju, and had wanted to be deployed to work with another Tamil foreman, Mohan. These workers felt that the work regime under the former was too harsh. They were both reprimanded by the supervisor and decided to accept their deployments. Mintoo eventually went on strike after getting into an argument with Raju, who had initially demanded that Mintoo return
to work but eventually left him alone. Raju then got into an argument with the supervisor for deploying “stupid men” to his section. For the next three days, Raju refused to take technical orders from the supervisor and proceeded to conduct work on his designated bridge as he saw fit. Meanwhile, in Mohan’s section, two workers – Shobuz (Bangladeshi) and Lwin (Burmese) – got into a heated argument over misplaced work tools⁵⁷ and subsequently refused to work by throwing their safety helmets to the ground. An elderly Bangladeshi scaffolder witnessed both these incidents with me and told me that he had never seen such behaviour among workers in his five years at EW Construction. He said that in the past, workers used to “happy happy working” (work happily) but now everyone had become “maata kharab” (i.e. they have lost their marbles) because of the stingy nature of the company.

Yet, workers were not just losing their marbles. Some of the workers from different groups had quietly started discussing seeking help from the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). Workers had to do this rather secretly as in most companies talk of “MOM” was often taken to be a signal of rebellion or defiance by contractors. Despite these whisperings, no concrete action actually came out of this as workers were extremely cynical about MOM’s propensity to support their grievances. One worker had pointed out that on account of some of his friends’ (outside the company) experiences, MOM always “supports the company and not the worker”. Furthermore, workers were also unsure as to whether they would be allowed to return to Singapore should they lodge a complaint. The workers were inclined to seek out one among them to do this but no volunteers were forthcoming.

Rain-stoppages effectively increased the intensity of work while significantly reducing workers’ monthly earnings. As work pacing was jeopardised by rain-stoppages, workers could not use obedience to improve the unsatisfactory effort-reward bargain. Worker outrage at these conditions led to several episodes of wildcat strikes, walkouts and insubordination to supervisory authority. The tense politics of obedience, previously maintained by work pacing, threatened to fall apart. While workers were not actively courting conflict with supervisors and management, these expressions of outrage and disgust brought them closer to confrontation.

⁵⁷ It turned out that these work tools were unloaded from the lorry at the wrong site by workers from a different section.
Supervisory Intervention and the Restoration of Obedience

Rather than attempting to suppress worker dissent in an antagonistic manner, supervisors intervened by attempting to restore worker obedience towards supervisory authority. They essentially did this in three interrelated ways – by securing small concessions from the managing director; by reducing worker efforts through direct interventions into work pacing; and by re-organising or re-ordering the labour process. These interventions had the effect of defusing anger among workers, allowing workers to claw back working-hours lost to rain-stoppages, reducing the frequency of rain-stoppages and significantly easing-up the work regime during rainy periods. While worker dissatisfaction over low wages and heavy work endured, these interventions put a lid on the simmering tensions brought about by the June and July rains.

Small concessions: time-off and extra overtime hours

On a mid-July morning, at the height of these tensions, around 35 steel and concrete workers were being ferried in four open-top lorries to three construction sites (about a kilometre apart) situated on a major expressway. It had been raining heavily since the workers had risen and the plastic sheets did little to prevent the workers from getting totally drenched. The rain had become so heavy by the time the lorries arrived at the first site (at around 8:30am) that all the workers had to get out of the lorries to take shelter at a bus stop. The torrential rains continued for at least another two hours as workers became increasingly frustrated at having to huddle under a small bus shelter. They were well aware that this would put another significant dent in their July earnings and were just as frustrated that there was nowhere that they could walk off to. As the rains showed no signs of abating two hours later, the supervisors started ringing one another to organise a response. The five supervisors – Aung, Rahim, Muthu, Lim and Wong – decided that Muthu would represent all of them to ask the managing director to call-off all work for the day on account of torrential rain and the workers to be paid half a day’s wages in exchange for the inconvenience they had to go through. The managing director agreed to this. At around 10:45am that day, the supervisors personally informed the 35 workers huddled under the bus shelter that work had been cancelled and that they would each receive half a day’s wages. Almost instantly, the despondence, frustration and anger of the workers turned to joy as some started making plans for how to spend the free day. It pleased the workers even more that the rain stopped after they had been
ferried back to their dormitory! While this episode did not actually address the discontent of the workers, the intervention of supervisors at that critical moment significantly defused workers’ anger over rain-stoppages.

While supervisors failed to repeal salary deductions for rain-stoppages or conceal these stoppages from the boss, they managed to secure several more concessions from the managing director. They did this by opportunistically bargaining for extra overtime hours for their respective charges. As things stood, the managing director had restricted workers’ overtime hours to two hours per day. This was largely because many construction sites were situated in residential areas where legal provisions required noisy construction work to cease by around 6pm. Before the rain-stoppages, supervisors (at the behest of workers dissatisfied with low overtime hours) had attempted to circumvent this by redeploying workers at the workshop after 7pm. However the managing director, through the use of surveillance cameras, soon discovered that workers were idling in the workshop during overtime hours and soon placed restrictions on overtime hours. During the heavy rains, supervisors again tried to persuade the MD to permit more overtime hours for willing workers. The MD reluctantly agreed on the condition that a maximum of two workers per group were deployed when there was work to be done in the workshop. My supervisor, Aung, responded by asking the steel workers under his charge to decide, on a daily basis, who among themselves would fill these two slots. Rather than questioning supervisory authority, as they had been doing for the past weeks, workers started bickering among themselves. As workers often could not amicably agree on this, Aung ended up having the final say on daily overtime deployments. This made workers willing to offer obedience to Aung as they, once again, saw that obedience could allow them preferential deployment. While I am not entirely sure if this was Aung’s intention, the end result was that workers started obeying him (rather than disputing his orders) in order to receive extra overtime hours.

Additionally, during the month of July, production had moved from bridges and walkways in residential areas to those in industrial areas. This meant that legal restrictions to cease construction by 6pm no longer applied. Most workers, it seemed, were actually unaware of this and often grumbled at having to work on sites that were not sufficiently close to many public amenities like canteens. However, the supervisors were aware of this and took this opportunity to bargain for extra on-site overtime hours. Again, the managing director gave conditional approval – make sure there is sufficient
lighting and make sure the workers actually do work! These two conditions would actually prove rather hard to fulfil. Firstly, the sun usually sets just before 7pm. Two additional hours of overtime would mean workers clock-out at 9pm, which means they wrap up work at around 8pm. This means that they are unable to fulfil the first condition as street lamps do not provide sufficient light for most work tasks such as welding, cutting/grinding, fitting bolts, drilling, etc. Secondly, as much as workers wanted to work till 8pm (for a 9pm clock-out) the work of steel fitters was so physically demanding that even the strongest workers struggled to get any form of work done after 6pm. Tempted by the opportunities to claw back more overtime hours but faced with these conditions, workers started doing what they had previously done best – work pacing.

Workers responded to the prospect of two extra hours of overtime by varying their work efforts during the entire working day in order to ensure that (i) they had enough energy to actually work during the extra overtime hours; and (ii) they could complete the “extra” overtime work before sunset. During surveillance periods in the late mornings, workers worked slowly but consistently and indulged in some simulation to conserve their energy while appearing to work. During non-surveillance periods after lunch, workers slowed work down to a standstill. They took the liberty of waking up from their lunchtime naps thirty minutes later and took another thirty minutes to get themselves ready for work. The hours from 2pm to 5pm were entirely spent on taking measurements and preparing (cutting and grinding) materials for installation while no actual installation (i.e. the real “heavy” work) was done during these hours. Usually measurements and preparations are done simultaneously with the erection of columns or the fitting of angle-bars. At 5pm, the supervisor arrived to confirm the approval of two additional overtime hours as workers indicated what work they will complete during that time. From 5:30pm to 7pm, with the measurements confirmed and materials prepared, workers pushed themselves and one another to erect more columns or fit more angle-bars at an intense pace. All the energy conserved during the day would be expended in these 1.5 hours to complete more than 2 hours worth of work. For example, workers pushed themselves to erect four steel columns in 1.5 hours which is actually a very reasonable return for half a day’s work. Workers did this to enable themselves, and their supervisors, to justify demands for extra overtime hours in future. These additional
overtime hours allowed workers to claw back some of their earnings that were being lost to rain-stoppages.

_Direct interventions in work pacing_

More significantly, it was direct supervisory intervention in the “game” of work pacing that allowed work pacing to be restored, albeit with new “rules”. While supervisors had previously given their silent consent to work pacing, they started directly participating in this game. While on-site, supervisors gave open approval for workers to slow down the pace of work and take longer pauses or breaks in work tasks. If workers faced difficulties in work pacing during rainy periods, supervisors stayed on-site to instruct workers as to which tasks could be set aside or simplified. Supervisors started to physically assist workers with heavy tasks, even lifting steel up the bridge. This had a double-effect of easing worker exhaustion – as supervisors became exhausted helping workers with lifting and fitting steel (and supervisors would get exhausted faster!), the former would have to call for pauses and breaks during work more frequently.

As they directly co-ordinated work pacing, supervisors also added new rules – while workers were now given explicit permission to work slowly and take frequent breaks; they were firmly told never to walk-off the job or appear idle. “[To] rest is ok”, said the supervisor, “but don’t go anywhere [outside the site]”. To further prevent walkouts, supervisors informally reinstituted the 3pm tea-break which had been previously discontinued by management. Not only that, supervisors “volunteered” to buy refreshments (sodas, snacks, tea and coffee) for workers (sometimes at the former’s expense) so that the latter would have one less excuse to walk-off the job. This hands-on approach by supervisors in work pacing effectively eased-up the extremely heavy work regime that workers were subjected to while restoring a semblance of voluntary labour discipline to the workforce.

_Reordering production sequence_

The most significant form of supervisory intervention made during this period, in my opinion, was the manner in which supervisors reorganised the sequence of production in order to avoid rain-stoppages from actually taking place. Typically, the preparation of materials at the workshop occurs simultaneously with on-site construction as two to three workers from each of the steel groups are deployed to work at the former while
construction proceeds at the latter. However, whenever supervisors see a risk of rain-stoppages occurring – either before work starts or at lunch time – they take the initiative to reorder the sequence of production by deploying most or all of their charges to the workshop. In other words, rather than working on preparation and construction simultaneously, construction is halted and preparation for future construction is done in advance. This intervention effectively prevents or limits the monthly frequency of rain-stoppages as the latter are never applied to workshop deployments. It does not actually have to rain for this to happen as supervisors often base their interventions on their subjective assessment of weather possibilities (i.e. if it looks overcast, if they see/hear lightning/thunder or if it is already pouring in the morning).

During these workshop deployments, workers from different groups are deployed to a range of tasks: steel workers are deployed to cut and weld steel materials; painters are assigned to spray-paint these materials (as they usually do anyway); scaffolders either assist the painters or are assigned to the sorting of scaffold materials such as couplers, tubes/pipes and boards; concrete workers are usually assigned to a range of miscellaneous work at the large outdoor scrap-yard adjacent to the actual workshop. While not every group is simultaneously redeployed at the workshop, there is nonetheless a relatively large concentration of workers (often 40 to 60) in a rather small workshop space (the scrap-yard is much larger, though) which more often holds less than 20 or 30 workers. At the same time, there is a large amount of surplus labour at the workshop premises as the preparation of materials requires considerably less labour than the number of workers redeployed. Furthermore, the surveillance cameras at the workshop mean that workers cannot appear idle.

Workers, however, manage to circumvent these issues through, again, work pacing. Workers, among themselves and with little pre-arrangement, started to rotate work on the shop floor. Two or three small groups of three to four workers each would start working an assigned task on the shop floor while the remainder would take to the (unsurveilled) back rooms (store rooms, vacant rooms and bedrooms of some workers) to smoke, socialise and nap. An hour or two later, the “idle” group would return to the shop floor to have work tasks informally “handed over” to them by the working group who would subsequently proceed out back. When the shop floor gets overcrowded, some workers are deployed out to the scrap yard to move or cut/grind steel. As these are largely housekeeping tasks (and hence not essential for production), workers often take
the opportunity to take naps in large metal storage containers in the yard. Supervisors, when they detect these indiscretions, often manage to find other tasks to reassign idle workers to. Together, the supervisory reordering of production sequence and workers’ response of work pacing makes the work regime considerably less demanding while concealing the surplus deployment of labour at the workshop from management.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Burawoy (1979: 77-94) demonstrated that managerial reorganisation of the production process as a series of games (in his case, the game was “making out”) meant that worker consent was produced by workers’ adherence to the rules of making out. In this case, work pacing did not originate from managerial design but arose spontaneously out of workers’ discontent over work and pay conditions. Management got work out of workers so long as workers continued to deliver obedience to their respective supervisors, which workers did in order to (in this case, at least) conceal work pacing from management. As I have shown in Chapter Four, this politics of obedience is premised on obstacles workers face in resisting control or confronting their work superiors as well as opportunities within the labour process to regulate or moderate their work efforts. Rain-stoppages had the effect of disrupting work pacing and made worker obedience less forthcoming as these opportunities were significantly narrowed down. Supervisory intervention in the ensuing crisis of obedience involved securing small concessions (such as extra overtime hours) from the managing director; direct intervention into the “game” of work pacing and; the reordering of production sequence. These had the effect of defusing worker outrage; allowing workers to claw back earnings lost to rain-stoppages while competing amongst themselves for extra overtime hours and; making the work regime less harsh by restoring work pacing. This allowed workers to, once again, use tactical obedience in order to win more overtime hours and/or conceal work pacing from the managing director.

With worker obedience to supervisory authority restored, it was now back to work (pacing) as usual. While the rains continued to pour heavily in July, the physical difficulties of working in wet conditions was significantly mitigated as supervisors paced work slower and used workshop deployments to minimize actual rain-stoppages. The anger of workers that had started flaring had been significantly quelled by the following month. When the following month’s wages were banked in, workers were visibly relieved that their earnings were only S$20-S$30 less than their usual earnings (rather than over S$100 below, as it was a month ago). The extra overtime hours
secured by their supervisors and the workshop redeployments had the effect of restoring monthly salary levels close to their initial levels. While workers soon became optimistic that they might start earning more in future, their existing dissatisfaction remained. They still felt that their pay was too low, the work was too hard and were generally pessimistic over their ability to succeed at their migration projects while working for EW Construction.

**Seeing like a Supervisor: Why they Intervened**

Before assessing the political implications of the restoration of obedience and work pacing among workers, we need to understand why supervisors intervened in this particular manner and why they were able to do so. Supervisors are typically understood to occupy a “contradictory class location” closest to the working class since the former have little or no control over the physical means of production while exercising some control over the labour power of the latter (Wright, 1982). However, Wright (1982: 125) sees supervisory control as nothing more than a “formal transmission belt for orders from above”. This, according to Richard Edwards (1973), is due to the institutional bureaucratisation of supervisors’ personal power. Work procedures and rules are designed and codified by management and the supervisor’s role is merely to enforce them at the point of production. Thus, Wright (1982: 125-126) argues that the personal power of supervisors become so diluted that this “contradictory” class position “merges” into the working class.

Such an explanation, however, cannot be used in this context. As I have shown in Chapters Two and Four, construction firms in Singapore (even relatively “large” ones like EW Construction) are extremely limited in their capacity to bureaucratised managerial control over the labour process. The supervisory interventions observed in this chapter are better explained by the idea of supervisory autonomy rather than the “contradictory class location” thesis of Wright. At EW Construction, supervisors are given broad autonomy to direct production. The managing director depends on them and holds them responsible for coordinating the company’s labour force, tools and materials to complete designated jobs within a stipulated time-frame. How supervisors coordinate production with the resources provided is largely up to them. It is the supervisors, not the managing director or the production manager, who need to find a
way to obtain work from workers. This is what supervisors are hired to do and their continued employment hinges on it.

This creates a set of class interests for the supervisory class that are relatively autonomous and separate from the interests of both the managing director and the workers under them. The profit motive of the boss and workers’ concerns over the low wages and harsh work conditions only matter to them as far as it directly affects their job security. Supervisors do not care if the “margins” of small-scale civil engineering gigs are better; they often reflected to me that they had much preferred working on piling operations where work coordination was more focused and less scattered and the work regime was considerably lighter. Likewise, supervisors do not worry about their charges’ migration projects – whether employment in EW Construction will make them rich or leave them in debt. At work, supervisors are confronted with the “problem” of getting work out of workers since their employment is directly contingent on this and it was this concern that drove them to intervene by restoring obedience rather than using coercion to quell worker resistance.

Supervisors were already dissatisfied with the managing director’s practice of stifling wage increments. Many workers whom the supervisors felt were experienced, competent and trustworthy – therefore highly dependable in following supervisory instruction – had left the company because management had refused to meet their requests for pay increments. To make matters worse, management initially did not replace these workers and supervisors had to individually lobby the managing director to bring in “new men”. Having to command a group of workers who are either agreeable to current wage rates or those compelled to accept it, supervisors feel that they are constantly left to use only “cheap men” – workers on low wages who are less proficient and dependable – to get work done for the managing director.

During the crisis of obedience, supervisors could have lashed out at dissenting and insubordinate workers or reported them to management and arranged for their deportation. However, within the context I have just described, the deportation of most of these workers (especially the foremen and the welders) would make it harder for supervisors to fulfil their job responsibility. The semi-skilled rank-and-file at EW Construction, like many of their migrant labour counterparts in Singapore, are essentially disposable. “Skill” sets like drilling, hacking, steel cutting/grinding and tack
welding are not rare by any means and there is an endless flow of migrant workers who are capable of performing these tasks. This, of course, is purely from the standpoint of the managing director. While the migrant labour force in the company may be disposable, in the eyes of supervisors, competent and dependable individuals under their charge cannot be disposed of without some costs to the supervisors themselves. New workers will need to be trained, not to drill holes or grind steel, but to understand how and when these tasks will be performed. They constantly need to be told what to do, for their first month or two at least. Having a large number of relatively inexperienced workers (more than half of Aung’s steel-fitter group have less than two years experience) not only slows down the progress of work, it also potentially increases the intensity of work for supervisors and workers alike. For instance, a recently promoted foreman with only one year’s prior experience on the job attempted to organise work pacing by ordering all the steel beams to be lifted to the top of the bridge in the morning (when it was less hot) and for workers to spend the rest of the day “slowly fitting” these beams to the angle-bars. However, when workers casually proceeded to fitting these beams after an intense morning of heavy lifting, they soon discovered that these beams were of the wrong technical specifications! The error, which originated from the workshop, could have been easily spotted by a more experienced foreman or even more experienced workers.

The more experienced workers are, the more proficient they become and are not only able to complete work tasks faster, they also manage to complete these with less effort. Supervisors, therefore, chose not to clamp down on dissenting workers during the crisis of obedience as replacing them with “new men” would inconvenience the supervisors further. Raju was the most experienced foreman in Aung’s group and Aung certainly did not want to lose Raju. Rony, despite being the most mischievous of the group, was the only remotely competent welder in the group and Aung certainly did not want to lose him either. For Aung, as with the other supervisors, the only conceivable thing to do was to get these dissenting workers back on their side, to restore obedience. Worker obedience, even as a facade for work pacing, had always worked to the advantage of supervisors in getting work done. By directly intervening in work pacing, supervisors were able to use workers’ “everyday resistances” to obtain desired work behaviour.
The Depoliticisation of Worker Grievances

The political significance of the restoration of obedience is that migrant worker grievances come to be depoliticised. This means that migrant worker grievances over low wages and physically-demanding work regimes, which are generated within the labour process, do not develop into contentious or confrontational struggles against control and exploitation. From this case study, we can see that the dynamics of control within the labour process is characterised by a particular authority structure that gives supervisors considerable autonomy and responsibility in organising production. At the same time, the construction labour process, characterised by dispersed work deployments and punctuated supervision, allows workers to regulate their efforts at work, as evidenced by the prevalence of work pacing. Just like the Bangladeshi workers interviewed in Chapter Four, worker dissatisfaction at EW Construction is fundamentally over the prevailing effort-reward bargain which requires too much effort from workers while leaving them with insufficient rewards to accomplish their migration projects.

Grievances over rewards were never sufficiently addressed. The structure of authority within the firm did not allow supervisors to intervene on matters of remuneration. Supervisors’ attempts to lobby management for better pay and increments for workers and the repeal of various wage deductions went largely unheeded. Despite this, supervisors secured extra overtime hours for workers which mitigated the loss of earnings caused by rain-stoppages. This had the effect of temporarily defusing worker anger towards management.

More significantly, however, worker dissatisfaction over efforts were significantly mitigated even after rain-stoppages have led to a crisis of obedience. When rain-stoppages jeopardise work pacing, the particular dynamics of control within the labour process allow supervisors to step-in in order to provide workers with new opportunities to regulate (or restrict) their physical efforts. Supervisory intervention here gives workers new causes to deliver obedience. These interventions made workers compete with one another and their own personal physical limits to gain extra overtime hours. During increased workshop deployments, workers now needed to use obedience, again, to conceal the fact that they were working considerably less. While the entailments of rain-stoppages drove workers to question and defy supervisory authority, supervisory
interventions – and not managerial designs – practically reconstituted the day-to-day experiences and objectives of workers, which led to the restoration of obedience (cf. Friedman, 1977; Burawoy, 1979: 77-94). In this manner, confrontation between workers and their work superiors was averted.

Worker grievances, however, continued to endure. Supervisory intervention did not resolve these grievances. It prevented grievances from developing into more contentious forms of struggle by effectively inhibiting the contentiousness of worker resistance in the labour process. Rain-stoppages had caused worker contestation to escalate from the relatively uncontentious work pacing into visibly contentious forms such as walkouts, wildcat strikes and insubordination. Supervisory intervention effectively limited visibly contentious struggles without actually resolving grievances; it only made them less acute and less contentious.

On this less contentious trajectory of resistance – i.e. addressing grievances through work pacing – workers have little cause to take to contentious forms of struggle such as walkouts and insubordination. This is because supervisory interventions have restored “safer” and less contentious forms of resistance, such as work pacing, where workers are able to pursue some of their immediate objectives albeit with many limitations. As was the case prior to the rain-stoppage episode, workers again believed that their interests would be best served by avoiding confrontation. Their enduring grievances did not escalate into more walkouts and moments of insubordination but culminated in passive non-renewal as 15 out of the 18 workers in my steel-fitter group eventually decided not to renew their contracts. These workers (and I was told there were many more from the other groups who did the same) addressed their grievances not through contentious forms of resistance that had started at the beginning of July, but by raising more money back home in order to find a better company where they would be paid better and work less. As a result, worker grievances, hugely exacerbated during rain-stoppages, subsequently lost their political moment.

**Conclusion**

This chapter is premised on the observation that the politics of obedience is highly precarious because of constant tensions between workers’ migration projects and employer wage pressure strategies. I have demonstrated that worker obedience at EW Construction, anchored in the tactics of work pacing, came to be destabilised by the
introduction of new wage pressures in the form of wage deductions for rain-stoppages. This created a crisis of obedience where supervisors struggled to control workers. I have, then, sought to explain how obedience comes to be restored and what its political implications were.

I argue that the restoration of obedience was brought about by supervisory interventions in the labour process rather than through managerial strategies (cf. Friedman, 1977, 1978; Burawoy, 1979; Edwards, 1979). The interventions of supervisors essentially involved securing small concessions from management; collaborating with workers’ work pacing; and re-ordering the production sequence. This had the effect of defusing worker outrage at critical junctures; making workers compete with one another for extra overtime hours; allowing workers to claw back earnings lost to rain-stoppages; and made the work regime relatively less harsh. As a result, tactical obedience started to become useful for workers to win preferential deployments and conceal work pacing.

Supervisors were able to make such interventions because they were given broad autonomy by management to direct production activities. This arrangement generates relatively autonomous class interests for supervisors which were separate from those of both workers and management. During the crisis of obedience, it was in the interest of supervisors to counter worker insubordination through restoring obedience rather than through punishment and coercion.

While supervisory interventions did not resolve existing worker grievances over low wages and harsh working conditions, these grievances were effectively depoliticised within the labour process in that they did not develop into confrontational or contentious struggles. The grievances that endured did not develop into further walkouts or other forms of insubordination but rather, into decisions by workers to passively decline contract renewals; to reconsolidate their migration projects by finding a better employer.
Chapter Six

Intimidation, Violence and Resistance: The Politics of Flight

In the previous two chapters I have shown that workplace struggles between Bangladeshi migrant workers and their employers often take the form of a politics of obedience. Workers tactically deliver obedience to work superiors in order to avoid confrontation and to secure better rewards for their work efforts. The former allows workers to avoid the coercive capacity of their employers – employer coercion in the form of threats, punishment, blacklisting, forced repatriation and various kinds of verbal and physical abuse, are pre-empted when workers deliver obedience. The latter tends to be less successful in repealing wage pressures but nonetheless allows workers to renegotiate the effort-reward bargain by regulating their own work efforts. The obedience-orientation of these workers tends to belie the enduring grievances that they have over low earnings, harsh working conditions and pessimism over the prospects of their migration projects.

In this chapter, I explain how these grievances transform into contentious struggles in the workplace. I focus on a common form of overt resistance among Bangladeshi workers – flight, or desertion from the workplace. Through an analysis of NGO case-files as well as interviews with Bangladeshi workers who have taken to flight, I identify particular forms of workplace disputes within which obedience-based politics cease to be useful or feasible for workers. Under these circumstances, workers feel compelled to confront their bosses over their grievances, which inevitably unleashed the coercive power of the latter. The coercive measures taken by employers to quell perceived insubordination (I focus largely on forced repatriation and threats) often (if not always) pose an immediate threat to workers’ migration projects and expose them to physical harm and indignity. As fear and desperation take over, Bangladeshi migrant workers take to flight in order to avoid further coercion and to seek external parties, such as NGOs, to assist them with their grievances. In other words, when opportunities for accommodation are lost during these disputes, workers become compelled to confrontation and, subsequently, to flight. This demonstrates that while structural factors such as political powerlessness and migration projects inhibit the agency of migrant workers, these factors also engender particular forms of resistance in the form of flight.
I argue that the political significance of flight as a contentious form of resistance comes largely from the political-legal (or structural) context within which workers act – specifically their occupational immobility and deportability which, together with high levels of debt, renders workers “bonded” to their respective employers. In such a context, I argue that flight is effectively an overt contestation of an employer’s sovereignty to deport undesired workers and an effective withdrawal of obedient labour-power beyond the immediate control of an employer wielding coercive power. Resistance through flight allows workers to bring their workplace grievances to NGOs and lawyers who, in turn, translate these grievances into various types of statutory claims. This effectively forces employers to resolve work-disputes within a formal-legal framework rather than through intimidation or forced repatriation. Flight does not only reflect worker attempts to escape from employer coercion, but also to seek and mobilise political resources to challenge coercion.

**Labour and Resistance**

The bulk of the literature on migrant labour politics tends to emphasise the structural limits of migrant worker agency either in the form of political coercion (Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Mitchell, 1996; de Genova, 2005; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Binford, 2009) or the inhibitions of migration projects (Pinches, 2001; Constable, 2007). Structural coercion is often taken to be an impediment to migrant worker resistance and contestation of exploitation and control. However, other works on migrant-labour resistance (Sargeson, 1999; Leung and Pun, 2009) as well as the broader labour politics literature (e.g. Thompson, 1966; Sewell, 1980; Ong, 1987; Metcalfe, 1988; Hart, 1991; Koo, 2001) go beyond seeing structural coercion as monolithically inhibitive. These works tend to show how various forms of structural domination – political authoritarianism (Koo, 2001); patriarchy (Ong, 1987; Hart, 1991); legal and institutional arrangements (Leung and Pun, 2009); and exploitation based on locality and *guanxi* (Sargeson, 1999), among others – tend to engender particular forms of collective or individualised resistances. In doing so, many of these studies highlight four causally-linked aspects of class struggle: political-economic structural factors; the particular ways in which workers experience exploitation; the shared sense of injustice or grievances that arise out of these experiences; and the mobilisation of political resources for resistance.
In this chapter, I interrogate the link between worker grievances and the contingency and form of their resistance. The causal link between these processes of class struggle cannot be taken for granted, as Constable’s (2007: 181-200) ethnographic account of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong shows. Furthermore, I have already demonstrated in the two previous chapters that widespread grievances do not always translate into confrontational struggles as forms of control used on construction sites effectively closed off spaces for confrontation while opening up opportunities for informal negotiation and accommodation.

A key concept that can be used to connect grievances with political action is that of “class capacities” used by Therborn (1983) and Lembcke (1991) to indicate workers’ capability to collectively mobilise in transforming “the basic social relations of capitalism” (Lembcke, 1991: 85). This capability, according to Therborn (1983), is contingent on the class’ “concrete economic location” and the socio-political resources available to it (ibid: 39). Migrant workers in Singapore, however, lack the capability to assert their class interests, both in the workplace and within Singapore society at large. This can be put down to what Therborn (ibid) calls “the intrinsic strength of the class” (ibid: 40) or its collective power. The intrinsic class strength of migrant workers is most clearly undermined by state policy, as I have described in Chapter Two, which makes them occupationally immobile and deportable and leaves them few legal-political rights within the context of a repressive labour environment. This is further complicated by the constraints brought about by workers’ migration projects, which I have illustrated in Chapter Three.

While this clearly undermines their ability to mobilise political resources to agitate for better working conditions, it does not mean that they simply do not resist control and exploitation. In this chapter, I will show that that these inhibitions, or their weak intrinsic class strength, do not preclude contentious struggles, but rather shape the precise nature of these struggles. I address how worker accommodation, based on the politics of obedience, descends into contentious forms of resistance such as flight. And why does resistance, in this context, tend to take the form of flight? What is its political significance?

The term flight is used here to indicate migrant workers “running away”, not just from the worksite, but also from the lodging provided by the company – out of the reach of
their employers. Unlike flight in antebellum slavery (e.g. Camp, 2004) or among indentured labourers (e.g. Behal, 1985), Bangladeshi migrant workers do not flee to “freedom”; they either stay on and work in Singapore as “illegals” (i.e. immigration offenders) or end up seeking legal assistance from NGOs and lawyers to help them address their grievances. While scholars such as Scott (1990) and Camp (2004), for instance, tend to portray flight as covert forms of “everyday resistances”, I tend to see it as an overtly contentious form of workplace struggle. As I will subsequently demonstrate, the act of flight is usually part of a longer episode of workplace conflict which also involves openly confrontational forms of worker agitation. At the same time, these instances of flight do not simply involve plain desertion but also workers seeking the assistance of NGOs in lodging formal complaints to the Ministry. These make flight, as a form of resistance, particularly explicit.

I address these questions of flight by interrogating the various causes (i.e. triggers) and courses (i.e. direction) of flight. I identify particular forms of workplace disputes between Bangladeshi workers and their employers that tend to end in flight – under-deployment; disputes over wage pressures and harsh work regimes; and disputes over work injuries. I trace the dynamics of these disputes to reveal how workers end up confronting their employers; how the latter’s coercive power is manifested; and how workers become compelled to flight. By situating the manner in which structural factors such as migrant-labour powerlessness and migration projects pan out within these disputes, I illustrate how structural coercion limits certain forms of resistance while engendering new forms. By tracing the courses of flight, I demonstrate how workers seek out and mobilise political resources in the form of NGO legal-assistance in order to address their workplace grievances. As worker grievances are translated into statutory claims with NGO support, workplace conflicts move from the workplace and into the formal-legal realm of the Ministry’s bargaining table.

**Forms of Disputes**

From the NGO case-files that document various worker complaints, I identified three general areas of disputes that drove Bangladeshi workers to eventually approach these NGOs for assistance. These disputes can be broadly classified into one of the following: (i) disputes over wage pressures and harsh work regimes; (ii) under-deployment (no jobs, no pay); and (iii) disputes over work injuries. Disputes are different from
grievances in that while the latter involves perceived unfairness over working conditions, the former involves open disagreement over certain aspects of these conditions. Disputes arise under these very particular circumstances that I will illustrate in this section whereas grievances arise out of the general and ordinary work experiences of Bangladeshi construction workers. The key aspect of disputes that I want to highlight here is that these workers do not have any formal means to pursue their interests within these disputes. At the same time, workers are unable to informally use an obedience-based politics to forward their interests as these circumstances often render such tactics unfeasible or useless. Despite these massive obstacles, the contestation of disputes becomes necessary for workers in order to preserve their physical well-being and their migration projects.

*Disputes over wage pressures and harsh work regimes*

In Chapter Four, I have shown that Bangladeshi workers, while overwhelmingly dissatisfied over the wage-pressure strategies of their employers, tend to use tactical obedience in order to solicit better rewards from the latter. This politics of obedience is based on workers attempting to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain and tends to find relative success in regulating or restraining the intensity of hard manual labour. The opportunities to informally negotiate work-efforts can be largely attributed to fairly autonomous supervisory arrangements. Furthermore, the ability of workers to reconsolidate migration projects means that workers often choose not to confront their employers over these wage pressures.

Out of the 97 work-stints culled from my interviews, 15 involved contentious forms of worker resistance such as flight, even though 80 stints reflected significant and unresolved worker grievances over wage pressures. I also collected 50 case reports culled from NGO sources of which 15 cases purely involved complaints of wage pressures and/or unpaid wages (i.e. did not also involve work injury disputes or complaints of under-deployment). I then compared these 15 case reports and the interview data from the 15 stints that ended in flight with 65 stints that reflected significant grievances but no contentious forms of resistance. I discovered that the types of wage pressures used by the respective employers – kickbacks; various types of salary deductions; paying overtime and rest-day wages below statutory rates; low and stagnant wages; and the withholding of wages – were common to both categories. Both groups of
workers had roughly the same basic and monthly salary range. Even with the introduction of the NGO case-file data, my findings here were similar to those reported in Chapter Four.

However, a significant difference was that the wage pressures in the flight cases tended to be more intense. In flight cases, wage pressures tended to be stacked or combined in such a way that migration projects tend to become overtly threatened rather than just compromised (as is usually the case). In some (but not all) flight cases, basic wages are kept as low as S$18 per day; workers are consistently paid below statutory rates for overtime and rest-day work; and salary deductions become so excessive that workers (especially new ones) find it difficult to even service their loans properly. I discovered that it typically takes about ten months for most first-time workers to fully repay their loans. However, some of the flight cases revealed that the affected worker was not able to fully service his debt even after one year of work. The intensity of wage pressures and its impact on respective migration projects, therefore, does have some bearing on whether worker grievances turn into disputes.

The most telling difference between those two groups however, was not so much in the amount they earned but rather in the nature of their respective work regimes. While punctuated supervision and autonomous work detachments tend to be common in the construction industry, the flight cases tended to involve more (10 out of 15 stints) instances of constant and intrusive supervision. When I compared the grievances of two different groups of plumbing workers I interviewed – a group of three from A-Con who eventually took to flight and a group of five from B-Con who continued with tactical obedience – it was the nature of these respective work regimes that set these cases apart.

Wage pressures were intense in both firms – both groups of workers were paid S$3 an hour for overtime work despite a basic wage of S$18 per day; both groups were paid only single-rates for rest-day work; both groups suffered additional wage deductions close to S$200 a month for food and accommodation which they perceived to be substandard.

While both firms were plumbing contractors, their daily work regimes were significantly different. The workers of A-Con were often deployed to work in sewers while those of B-Con were largely performing maintenance on the plumbing system of a large resort. Work in the former was considerably dirtier and harder than in the latter.
A more significant difference was that workers in A-Con were constantly and intrusively supervised. Workers were always accompanied by a supervisor who would be constantly directing and monitoring work. At B-Con, on the other hand, the “supervisors” were only in name and were actually just experienced hands with no authority over the other workers. The owner of the company was the one who directed workers to various tasks that needed to be performed and their respective deadlines. However, the owner was frequently off-site, thus allowing the workers to frequently work without surveillance. While the “supervisor” was sometimes under pressure from the client to complete work, the actual place of work (i.e. where the plumbing system was located) was secluded. The workers of B-Con took advantage of this arrangement by tactically using obedience towards their boss as a facade for opportunistic slow-downs (Interview, 25-12-2011). This significantly moderated the intensity of work at B-Con.

The lack of worker autonomy at A-Con, however, meant that their workers had little or no opportunity to regulate their work efforts in order to make the work regime more tolerable. Constant and intrusive supervision by impatient and abusive supervisors made it almost impossible for workers to find spaces for informal negotiations. With few options to address an unfair effort-reward bargain, obedience-based politics are unable to bring workers better rewards or a lighter work regime. The workers of A-Con reflected that they often struggled to find ways to ease-up their efforts or conceal slow-downs or work pacing when their supervisors were constantly on-site to drive them on (Interview, 02-01-2012). While workers from both firms were confronted by very low earnings as a result of intensive wage pressures, the workers from A-Con also had to contend with persistent physical tiredness and fatigue.

Late, non-payment and the withholding of wages are some particular wage pressure strategies that almost always lead to disputes. These usually happen because of cash flow problems that contractors face when their clients do not release payments on time. When wages are not paid for over a month, workers see little point in pursuing obedience politics. The non-payment of wages makes workers wonder if their jobs are secure or if they will ever be paid at all. Migration projects are immediately threatened especially when workers are relatively new and have substantial amounts of debt to service.
In this situation, groups of workers are not deployed or are sparsely deployed to work over long periods of time. This is often because their employers either do not have sufficient jobs or because projects have been delayed or cancelled. This problem is particularly common among, but not unique to, labour-supply contractors. Some contractors (especially labour-supply firms) have little qualms about bringing in surplus labour as they are able to profit from kickbacks via the recruitment fees that workers pay. During the GFC between 2008 and 2009, local NGO HOME recorded about 440 complaints of under-deployment out of 1,047 total complaints between April 2008 and March 2009. In contrast, before the GFC, the April 2007 to March 2008 records at HOME revealed an almost negligible number of similar cases.

The use of wage pressure strategies during periods of under-deployment has an extremely acute effect on the earning capacity of migrant workers. Based on NGO case-file records and some interviews conducted with affected workers, workers are not paid at all when not deployed to work. Even when not deployed and not earning anything, workers are still subject to various salary deductions mandated by the company such as for rent, food and utilities. These deductions are carried over – for example, if workers are not deployed to work in June but are subsequently deployed in July, the deductions for both June and July will be applied to July’s wages. This often leaves workers with negligible or no earnings for several months. Employers simply tell workers to “wait” because “jobs will come soon”, but provide no definitive time-frame.

Workers in this position feel that their migration projects are being overtly threatened. Many face huge debts at home that they are in no position to service. Their families become disgruntled when no money is remitted or, even worse, can face threats from creditors. There is nothing obedience-based politics can do for workers in this situation – there is no effort-reward bargain that workers can negotiate. To obey the employer’s order to “wait” for jobs would actually worsen the predicament that they and their families face.

Under the confusing Man-Year Entitlement (MYE) system, contractors are technically allowed to bring in workers in excess of the projects they have been awarded. However, contractors who bring in workers in excess of this MYE-quota have to pay higher levy rates for excess workers. This was meant to serve as a deterrent for contractors from doing so. However, by receiving kickbacks via workers’ recruitment fees, these contractors are able to transfer a good part of these levy costs back onto the workers themselves.
When under-deployment is intermittent, tensions between workers and employers are stoked or heightened. Workers are outraged that their monthly earnings are way below what they had expected; barely covering their monthly debt repayments. Workers blame the impropriety of the company for not having enough jobs. Tensions over other wage pressures, especially wage deductions and kickbacks, become a lot more acute as these deductions (which are constant) have a disastrous effect on worker-earnings during periods of under-deployment. Intermittent under-deployment, thus, has the effect of significantly exacerbating existing tensions over wage pressures whilst leaving workers with no opportunity to negotiate the effort-reward bargain.

Disputes over work injuries

These are disputes between individual workers and their respective employers over the occurrence and proper management of injuries sustained by the worker in the course of work. Under Singapore’s Work Injury Compensation Act (WICA), all manual workers (as well as non-manual workers earning below S$1,600 a month) are entitled to work injury benefits in the form of lump-sum or permanent incapacity compensation (PI), full medical-leave wages for up to 60 days and two-thirds of that amount for one year after the accident and full medical expenses for a period of one year (Government of Singapore, 1975). While these benefits are meant to be paid to the worker by the employer, the labour Ministry makes it compulsory for employers to purchase WICA insurance for every migrant worker hired. This effectively means that the insurers usually end up having to foot the bill. Despite this, a number of employers are often keen to conceal work injuries either because they think the injury is not serious, they are concerned about increases in insurance premiums, the insurance policy has lapsed, they are concerned about having to house and feed an unproductive worker, or they simply believe the worker is faking injury.

NGO case reports and the interview data revealed that not only do many employers not report work injuries when they are brought to their attention, they also attempt to prevent workers from lodging these claims on their own. As it only becomes compulsory for the employer to report a work injury if the worker is hospitalised for over 24 hours or is deemed medically unfit for work for more than three consecutive days, some employers force their workers to see a pre-designated company doctor who colludes with the employer to conceal the seriousness of the injury. NGO case reports
reveal that some workers who had sustained fractures were initially only given two days medical leave by doctors in collusion with the employers. When workers end up going to a government hospital for treatment, their medical certificates are sometimes confiscated to prevent workers from lodging their own claims. Workers are often reminded by their employers that they have come to Singapore to work and only with work will they receive any money (HOME case reports; Interview, 28-12-2011). With this “reminder”, employers often order the injured worker to return to work or face repatriation. NGO case reports also reveal that many employers refuse to pay their injured workers any wages unless they turn up for work.

The case reports and interview data further reveal that many workers are not provided with proper medical attention. Al Amin told me that his supervisor left him at his dormitory for a whole month ignoring his pleas for medical attention (Interview, 28-12-2011). Thanda Bepary told me that his employer refused to take him to a hospital after he suffered a suspected fracture on his ankle, and instead, brought him to a traditional Chinese physician for what Thanda called a “massage”.

Some of my interviewees who were involved in such disputes indicated that they were aware that their right to work injury compensation was being breached by their employers’ actions. Other interviewees who were then not aware of their legal rights, such as Al Amin and Thanda, were nonetheless alarmed because they were in great pain and either ordered to return to work or just flatly ignored. When the injury shows no sign of healing within a week, affected workers feel increasingly isolated and helpless. Even when workers are not forced to return to work, “resting” in the dorm for long periods (over a week) can undermine their earning capacity when they are not paid medical-leave wages. In such situations, affected workers are unable to do their employers’ bidding because they feel it compromises their right to injury compensation or because doing so will simply expose them to more physical pain.

Disputes over work injuries tend to be individual disputes that pit an individual worker against his employer and it rarely affects a collective group of workers. Co-workers tend to avoid rallying around an injured worker in dispute (even when they empathise with him) because it would compromise their own job security, and hence migration.

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59 This is because any work injury report to the ministry has to be accompanied by the relevant medical certificates.
projects. Nonetheless, many workers covertly assist their injured co-workers in helping them escape from forced repatriation, lending them money and referring them to lawyers or NGOs. At later stages, some workers even put their jobs on the line in agreeing to provide eye-witness accounts of the industrial accident (various interviews and HOME case reports).

No recourse in disputes

When disputes arise, workers do not have the formal means to address their grievances and protect their immediate interests. Construction companies in Singapore have no formal grievance mechanisms for workers to lodge complaints nor do they have systematic dispute-resolution procedures. In a dispute, workers are simply told by bosses and managers to do as they are told. Workers who openly demonstrate disobedience in disputes are almost always threatened with repatriation. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, employer strategies for dispute resolution revolve around the intimidation and forced repatriation of insubordinate migrant workers. Furthermore, there are no collective bargaining platforms for workers within and outside the company. Trade unions in Singapore are largely controlled by the ruling PAP government (Rodan, 1989; Hing, 1997) and remain out of reach for these workers.

Formal complaint mechanisms at the Ministry of Manpower are relatively more accessible to workers. Despite this, migrant workers face many obstacles to labour justice even when they are aware that their rights are being infringed upon. Employers have the unilateral right to terminate the employment of their migrant workers and often resort to this when migrant workers lodge formal complaints at the Ministry. Workers are usually reluctant to lodge claims for fear of losing their jobs (HOME and TWC2, 2010). Additionally, workers are unable to change jobs. Many workers cannot even afford to quit their present job and return home because of the amount of debt and social shame that they would have to face.

On the informal side, workers are unable to use obedience-based politics as the circumstances I have highlighted often render such tactics unfeasible or useless. As I have demonstrated, the use of constant and intrusive supervision can often close-off spaces for workers to informally negotiate the effort-reward bargain, heightening existing tensions over excessive wage pressures and harsh work regimes. Workers are also unable to use obedience-based politics when they have no work. When grossly
under-deployed, workers are not called-upon to expend their efforts, nor are they given any form of reward. In some situations, obedience to the employer’s command can actually bring harm to affected workers. To follow an employer’s order to wait for work to come when under-deployed immediately threatens migration projects. An injured worker who is ordered to return to work or deprived of medical care feels that his physical well-being is at stake and cannot obey such orders.

**Confronting the Boss**

Workers in disputes are caught in a bind of fear. On the one hand, they fear for their physical well-being and that of their migration projects. On the other, they fear reprisals for disobedience and are constrained in terms of their political options. In the words of Shafiq, “follow (obey) also problem; don’t follow (disobey) also problem” (Interview, 08-01-2012). At the same time, workers feel that they need to confront “the boss”, because it is only he who has the “power” to rectify the circumstances that they are in.

**Worker demands**

Initial demands are often like pleas as workers attempt to avoid “fighting” with their work superiors. However, these quiet pleas – often made directly to “the boss” or through a supervisor or office staff member – are usually either ignored or dismissed. For some workers who work in relatively large companies, getting access to “the boss” can be quite difficult. These workers are often shafted around from supervisor to production manager to human resource clerks, all of whom do little to properly address their grievances.

When initial pleas are ignored or dismissed by the boss, workers get more agitated and either individually or collectively (depending on the situation and how many workers are affected) make firm demands to the employer. These demands are usually made verbally, but sometimes in writing, and directly either to “the boss” or a person in management who holds higher positional authority than their immediate supervisors. The worker or group of workers usually head straight for the company’s office to seek an audience with “the boss” or one of his managers. Sometimes these workers are called in to the office or visited at the dormitory by the boss/manager if the latter picks up early signs of (individual or group) unrest.
Workers in disputes over wage pressures often demand the repealing or refunding of past salary deductions and under-payment of overtime and rest-day rates. Faced with salary deductions for housing (S$40 a month) and kickbacks (S$600 in total) and a stagnant basic wage of S$18 (where S$22 was promised), Arif Sarker demanded that all the kickbacks be returned to him and his monthly earnings be recalculated and back-paid according to a S$22 basic rate (HOME case report 26-06-2008). Dissatisfied with his low monthly earnings and “dirty” work conditions, Shahin demanded that salary deductions for “security deposit” and utility bills be repealed and refunded back to him by the end of his current contract (Interview, 25-12-2011). Kamrul and his eight co-workers, who were paid below statutory rates for overtime and rest-day work, asked their employer to restore these rates to the statutory level and to back-pay them for previous months’ work (HOME case report, 17-08-2009).

Workers faced with intensive coercive pressures and harsh work regimes rarely demand an easing up of work duties although they may demand that the company take certain safety precautions when directing them to work and allow them sufficient rest during work time. Workers who are overworked (i.e. work over 14 hours a day) often demand a cap on daily working hours at 12 hours a day so that they can earn sufficient overtime wages while allowing their bodies to recover from strain and fatigue. The fact that they do “hard labour” and “work very hard” is used to support their demands for better rewards and more rest (various interviews).

Workers with late or unpaid wages directly demand that their wages be paid up immediately. In one case, about 100 Bangladeshi workers got a local “friend” to help them write a letter of demand, signed by all 100 workers, to management after going unpaid for three months. After outlining the problems faced by their families in Bangladesh, the letter demanded that all owing wages be paid “within [a] short time” and wages, in future, were to be paid punctually on the 10th day of every month. At the end of the letter, the workers also threatened the company that they would approach MOM if the company refused to address their predicament (HOME case report, 12-07-2010).

60 The NGO case-worker who handled this case told me that the workers already had this letter with them when they approached HOME for assistance. The case-worker reflected to me that it was most likely written by a Singaporean worker who worked (in a different firm) in the industrial estate where their company workshop was located.
In under-deployment cases, workers know that it would be pointless to demand deployment if their employer has no jobs. Their major concerns here would be their loans, and they would ring up their recruitment agents in Bangladesh to demand their money back. If workers were recruited in groups, they would often threaten their agents with bodily harm despite knowing that these recruiters are more politically influential than they are. However, by constantly threatening and harassing their recruiters, they would inadvertently be able to trace how their recruitment fees were passed down from one middle-man to another. By continuing to harass every middle-man who profited off their recruitment, workers sometimes find out how much their own employer pocketed (allegedly, at least) in terms of kickbacks. Workers, usually in groups of 10 to 30, end up confronting their employer that his share of the kickbacks (usually alleged to be $2,000-$5,000 per worker) be returned to them immediately so that they may cut their losses and return to Bangladesh. Some employers deny taking kickbacks while others contest that their share of the recruitment fees was much lower than what the workers suggest (various interviews and HOME case reports).

Individual workers involved in work injury disputes demand that their employers report their injuries so that they may be eligible for compensation. They demand to be given proper medical attention, not from company doctors who collude with their employers, but at a public hospital with a letter of guarantee from the company (various interviews and HOME case reports). The latter would allow the worker to receive medical treatment with all bills being sent to the company, and not the worker, for settlement. When Al Amin was ignored by his employer for a whole week after his work injury, he made repeated demands to the company’s office staff and later the production manager for the company to report his work injury to MOM and for the company to provide him with a guarantee letter for him to go to hospital. He also threatened his manager that if the company did not do so, he would have to make a complaint at the Ministry even though, as he confided to me in the interview, he did not know how to do so at the time (Interview, 28-12-2011).

Disobedience

Workers sometimes combine these demands with overt demonstrations of disobedience at work. Some forms of disobedience, such as work-stoppages, are sometimes used to pressure employers to give in to demands while other forms of resistance, such as
truancy, are used to protect workers from the repercussions of making bold demands. Other times, open disobedience to supervisory or managerial command could be simply due to the extreme frustrations that workers feel when entangled in these disputes.

All these forms, however, centre upon the worker’s refusal to work. Through the interviews and case reports, I discovered that some workers use impromptu work-stoppages at the workplace to express outrage at intolerable working conditions and wage pressures. One HOME case report (dated 17-06-2008) detailed that Jahangir Alam was locked in a dispute with his employer over the company’s clocking system. The worker always started work at 7am but his start time was always recorded as 8am. Furthermore, Jahangir was displeased with a S$300 deduction from his salary every month for “security deposit”. It was documented in the case report that the worker “went on a strike” and “shouted at [his] employer” in the presence of his co-workers.

Workers involved in work injury disputes almost always disobey orders to return to work either by staying put in the dormitory, playing truant (“going out” instead of making themselves available to be picked up for work) or just refusing to work when brought to the worksite. The refusal to work is often individual and spontaneous but stems from deep-rooted grievances and the circumstantial inability of workers to resort to obedience-based politics.

The Coercive Power of Employers

Only in rare instances do these forms of informal, but overt, worker resistance bring about any kinds of improvements for the workers themselves. In the only instance uncovered among both my interviews and HOME case reports, Rasel and one of his co-workers were locked in a dispute with his employer (a labour supply contractor) over the constant and intrusive supervision methods of the new supervisor as well as low and stagnant pay. The two workers demanded that they be re-deployed to a different worksite (and hence, under a different supervisor) and that their basic wages be increased by four dollars a day. They stayed away from work for an entire week, insisting that they would not return until their demands were met. A week later, their employer finally called them in for a meeting; he agreed to re-deploy them and assured them he would seriously consider a raise for them. Rasel and his colleague never received a raise, but accepted the re-deployment and returned to work (Interview, 11-11-2010).
In all other documented instances, however, worker confrontation and disobedience inevitably unleashes the coercive power of employers who seek to counteract worker insubordination through a combination of threats, financial penalties, violence and forced repatriation. In the previous two chapters, I showed that bosses and supervisors rarely use coercion (threats, intimidation and violence) to get work out of workers. This was not because of their incapacity to do so. Rather, I argued that it was the obedience-based politics of workers that pre-empted the use of coercion to command and direct work. However, once disputes arise and workers feel compelled to withdraw their obedience, the full coercive capacity of the employer is often unleashed upon the worker. While bosses and supervisors take advantage of worker obedience to direct and command work, bosses use coercion as a highly convenient means of resolving labour disputes (such as those outlined above) and suppressing worker resistance.

**Threats**

Employers are quick to respond to worker demands with threats of repatriation and blacklisting. Not only are workers threatened that they will be instantly repatriated if they do not follow orders, they are also told that they will never be allowed back into Singapore. Al Amin’s demands for proper medical attention and work injury compensation were met with an ultimatum from his production manager who told him, “Amin, do you want to go back to Bangladesh or do you want to stay in Singapore to work and earn money for your family? If you want to stay then you must go back to work.” (Interview, 28-12-2011) Masud’s employer threatened to “throw” him back to Bangladesh like “rubbish” (HOME case report 11-10-2010). Similar demands by Liton were met by even harsher threats from his employer who told him that if he dared to take his complaint to MOM, he would find himself on the first flight back to Dhaka and would never get a chance to come back to Singapore to work ever again (Interview, 26-12-2011).

**Isolation and violence**

When threats do not get workers back on the path of obedience, employers act to isolate “trouble-makers” from the rest of the workers. Employers I spoke to found this necessary because they do not want worker agitation to spread. They see disobedient workers as a “bad influence” on the rest of the workforce (Interviews with contractors, 09-01-2012 and 10-01-2012). To isolate “trouble-makers”, employers try to physically
move these workers out of the company dormitory where the rest of the workers are housed. This is usually done by force or deceit. Al Amin told me that his production manager came to pick him up at the dormitory to finally bring him to the doctor. Instead, Amin was brought to a secluded construction site and told to remain in a steel container room to await further instructions. The production manager then drove off and left Amin with little means to find his way out (Interview, 28-12-2011). Often, employers also confiscate the mobile phones or work permit cards of workers. The former will stop workers from contacting co-workers or their friends outside for assistance while the latter will inhibit workers from wandering around in public as they would be vulnerable to getting arrested without proper identification.

There are also cases where employers use direct physical violence to intimidate workers into submission. NGO case reports reflect some cases of workers being slapped, punched and physically man-handled by their employers or his associates. Physical abuse is often accompanied by verbal and psychological abuse. For example, one HOME case report documented that Kamrul and two of his colleagues were beaten up by 16 people (presumably hired by their employer) after the workers demanded proper payments of overtime and rest-day wages. A police report attached to the case report indicated that one of the assailants “took a metal rod of about 9mm thickness and one arm’s length long” and hit Kamrul’s left knee (HOME case report, 17-08-2009). In an interview, Mamun told me that his employer locked him in an empty room in the company’s premises and punched and slapped him several times after he refused to return to work following a work injury (Interview, 16-10-2010).

Forced repatriation

When all other methods of coercion fail, employers attempt to forcefully repatriate agitating workers. Contractors cannot simply terminate the employment of their migrant workers – they are held legally responsible by the MOM for repatriating workers who have been terminated or have ended their terms. An employer may terminate a worker’s work-permit at any time he wishes, but he is legally required to repatriate the worker within seven days of this termination or he may not have his S$/5,000 bond refunded by the Ministry. Employers hire repatriation companies to forcefully repatriate insubordinate workers because they are afraid that workers may “run away” and that they might lose their bond with the Ministry.
Repatriation companies in Singapore specialise in the repatriation of work-permit holders. They are not legally required to have a special license to operate. In 2005, there were between five and ten such companies in Singapore (The New Paper, 26-11-2005). These companies, known to most migrant workers simply as “gangsters”, escort workers from the dormitory or worksite and hold them in custody at the repatriation company premises until they are ready to be repatriated. The period of time workers are held at the repatriation company premises can vary from a few hours to over a week. During this time, workers are confined and typically not allowed to leave and are physically and psychologically intimidated into accepting repatriation. Once the workers’ relevant documents have been prepared by the employer, the repatriation company escorts these workers to the airport where they are sent through the immigration gates. These companies are also hired to track down missing workers (Various interviews; HOME and TWC2, 2010: 8; Jakarta Globe, 03-08-2011; CNN, 07-10-2011). While many of their activities contravene the Penal Code in Singapore (Government of Singapore, 1872) – such as wrongful confinement or wrongful restraint (Chapter XVI, Section 340) – the police do not consider this a criminal offence (The Straits Times, 31-01-2009; HOME and TWC2, 2010: 8). According to HOME’s then executive director Jolovan Wham, the authorities see migrant workers as “social problems and potential immigration offenders” and are “happy that repatriation companies can perform this function” of forceful repatriation for them (Jakarta Globe, 03-08-2011).

Employers attempt to forcefully repatriate their workers for several reasons. They may want a work injury concealed because claims on insurance policies may push up premiums. They are fearful that worker agitation might spread in the company and would like to nip it in the bud. When a large group of workers are agitating, a small or medium-sized contractor usually does not have sufficient resources to repatriate all of them at one go. The employer may try to repatriate one or two individuals to instil fear in the remaining workers. Employers are also fearful that their workers may “run away” and that they may, consequently, lose the S$5,000 bond they have to put up for each worker they employ. Often employers are found to have been attempting to forcefully repatriate their workers without paying outstanding wages/notice-pay owed to them or after having made illegal deductions from their wages for the price of air tickets (CNN, 07-10-2011; various HOME case reports). Employers want to get rid of agitating
workers without having to resolve the dispute formally at MOM and they have faced little or no formal obstacles in doing so.

**Flight as the Consequence of Coercion**

From the above account of employer coercion, it becomes clear that overt worker resistance in the workplace not only produces few or no favourable outcomes for workers but also subjects them to intense forms of threats, intimidation, violence and forceful repatriation. These coercive measures pose a direct and immediate threat to workers’ migration projects and expose them to physical harm and indignity. Workers embroiled in disputes over intense wage pressures, under-deployment and work injuries already have very low earning capacity. Forced and premature repatriation means affected workers have to return home to unserviceable amounts of debt and social ostracisation and their migration projects cannot be reconsolidated by any means. Threats and beatings meted out by employers cause workers physical hurt and humiliation.

As a result, the sense of disempowerment that workers feel (as documented in Chapter Four) turns into fear, despair and desperation. The sentiments of workers at the wrong end of their employer’s coercive power is well illustrated by Masud’s diary entries just two weeks before he “ran away” from his company. Threatened with repatriation after he refused to work following a work injury, Masud writes of his father using all his savings – S$10,500 in all – in order to send Masud – the oldest son – to Singapore. He goes on to say that his entire family now depends on his earnings and that his “future will be dark” if he is sent back to Bangladesh. The diary ended with “Now what I will...” indicating the despair, uncertainty and desperation he was going through (HOME case report 11-10-2010).

In fear and desperation, workers take to flight – they “run away” or “come outside the company”. While this could involve several highly circumstantial tactics, it always involves workers discreetly moving away from the worksite or dormitory to another place – their friends’ dormitories or the streets of the Little India district where Bangladeshi workers usually congregate – where their employers can neither control nor reach them. From the interviews and the case reports, I observed that experienced workers tend to pre-empt employer coercion by running away before they are intimidated or forcefully repatriated. Shakwat, for instance, did not even bother making
demands to his employer when embroiled in a dispute over numerous salary deductions. “For what?” he said, “I know boss don’t want to give me the money, so why fight? If he hantam [beats] me or call gangster catch [i.e. to forcibly repatriate] then more problem.” (Interview, 09-11-2010).

Other workers, like Muqbul, are tipped-off by their co-workers or even supervisors when the repatriation company is on their way to take the worker into custody (Interview, 28-12-2011). Some workers manage to escape while being escorted from their dormitories by the repatriation company. Some workers who fail to escape until they are escorted to the airport either refuse to go through the gates at immigration or refuse to board the flight after clearing immigration. Some workers who are unable to escape from repatriation companies ring up the police for assistance but are often told to comply with the repatriation company’s instructions. Some manage to source the phone numbers of NGO helpdesks to request assistance. NGOs often send case-workers or volunteers down to negotiate the release of workers from repatriation companies (various HOME case reports).

From the account so far, it is evident that the occurrences of labour disputes necessitate worker confrontation and agitation. This is because workers have few or no formal avenues of redress and are unable to use tactical obedience to protect their immediate interests. Worker agitation in the form of demands and overt acts of insubordination is almost always doomed to failure. Because of the extremely weak “intrinsic class strength” (Therborn, 1983: 40) of these workers, individual or even collective agitation can be suppressed by employers through intimidation and force. Under these circumstances, employer strategies of dispute-resolution – using threats, isolation, violence and forceful repatriation – often prevail. These strategies pose an intense and immediate danger to workers and their migration projects. The resultant fear and desperation drives workers to flee.

While political powerlessness and the inhibitions of migration projects, within the nexus of the ordinary dynamics of control, drove workers to tactics of obedient accommodation; the occurrence of open disputes eventually drove them to flight. The key aspects of disputes are that: (i) they pose an immediate danger to migration projects; (ii) workers are no longer able to defend their interests with tactical obedience; (iii) workers have little choice but to confront their employers; and (iv) the coercive
power of employers is consequently unleashed. It is also significant that employers do not explicitly use coercion to set workers to work – workers’ tactical obedience often makes this unnecessary – but to suppress overt insubordination and as a strategy to resolve work disputes. When the coercive power of employers is unleashed, it is the very same political powerlessness and migration projects that make it compelling for workers to flee from their employers in order to seek redress. Under different workplace circumstances, migrant worker powerlessness and migration projects shape worker responses to exploitation and control in different ways – while they inhibit some forms of formal contestation, they engender new forms such as flight.

The Course of Flight

Fleeing workers either stay on to find work in Singapore as over-stayers or they seek out other social actors to assist them with their predicament. In this chapter, I focus exclusively on the latter. When workers flee, they seek sources of “power” or allies to assist them in seeking redress for their problems at work. Most Bangladeshi workers who flee are at a loss as to what to do – they want to stay on in Singapore and work for another company or claim some form of financial compensation for their work injuries. They want something to be done to redress the injustices they have faced at the hands of their employers. They ring up their agents to demand at least a portion of their recruitment fees back but to no avail. They approach the police with their complaints – sometimes the police allow them to lodge a report for physical abuse but they are often told to approach MOM for work-related matters. When workers go directly to MOM, they are often turned away by the counter-staff who urge them to “go back to the company” and to renegotiate with their employer. Their friends may introduce them to lawyers but lawyers would only take up work injury cases and usually do not help them with other forms of disputes.

Fleeing workers connect with local migrant worker NGOs, such as HOME and TWC2, in several ways. To start with, a number of migrant workers are aware that there are NGOs around to assist them with work-related problems. Both HOME and TWC2 conduct outreach activities among migrant workers in certain urban enclaves where these workers congregate (such as the Little India district) and also offer various recreational facilities for migrant workers. These workers often assist their friends in need by directing them to the NGO helpdesks. Most workers find out about these NGOs
from their friends or relatives. Others are directly referred to these NGOs by work injury lawyers. Some workers learn of these NGOs from a handbook given out by the Ministry of Manpower when they first receive their work permit cards.

NGOs assist workers in three general ways. Firstly, case workers or volunteers at NGOs translate worker grievances over work injuries, under-deployment and wage pressures into formal complaints at the Ministry. By querying workers on their grievances, case workers attempt to find out which particular labour laws or regulations have been breached by the employer. They then proceed to assist the worker to lodge relevant claims to the Ministry such as work injury claims, salary claims and complaints regarding the infringement of EFMA (Employment of Foreign Manpower Act) regulations. Work injury claims are fairly straightforward, but case workers have to ensure that the fleeing worker has received proper medical attention and medical certificates before lodging a claim as these forms of documentation are necessary for this. Salary claims are lodged when there are unpaid wages involved and/or when certain kinds of salary deductions contravene the Employment Act. Complaints regarding the infringement of EFMA regulations are made when case workers discover that workers have been deployed outside their specified industry (i.e. construction workers deployed as cleaners) or when allegations of kickbacks are made. EFMA-related complaints are not claims per se in that workers are unable to claim any form of compensation. Rather, workers are kept in Singapore by the Ministry as prosecution witnesses in ongoing investigations of their employers. Workers who lodge statutory claims are given “special passes” – a visa renewable on a weekly or fortnightly basis – that legalise their stay in Singapore throughout the duration of their cases, which can last anywhere from two weeks to over a year.

Secondly, NGOs assist workers with their daily needs while they are in Singapore. HOME has two worker shelters – one for men and one for women. Although the men’s shelter has the capacity to accommodate 20 to 40 workers, this has proved to be insufficient given the long duration of some cases and the large number of workers who require shelter. Workers unable to secure shelter often end up renting a bed in shop-house rooms, secretly crashing in with some of their friends, or simply sleeping on the

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61 This includes infringements of work permit rules and regulations.
streets. Food-wise, TWC2 runs a soup kitchen in Little India that is open for lunch and dinner several times a week.

With their families in debt and their day-to-day living precarious, workers inevitably have to take up “illegal” or “ali baba” jobs to make ends meet despite the fact that their special passes prevent them from working\(^\text{62}\).

Workers take on a range of casual jobs as shop assistants, packers and loaders, small-scale construction workers, cleaning and even cooking helpers for small establishments. Their “illegal” employers are often small business owners who are either ineligible to bring in migrant workers or who need extra labour to tide over busy business periods. These jobs pay well – about S$50 a day for eight hours of work or less – but are often sporadic and hard to come by. Workers often need to be well-connected to friends who can refer them to employers in the market seeking to hire casuals.

Finally, NGOs continue to provide legal support to workers for the duration of their claims. While workers may be legally represented by lawyers in work injury claims, the Ministry does not allow NGOs to formally represent workers in any of their claims. NGO workers are also typically disallowed from attending or sitting-in at “conciliation” meetings between workers and their employers that are conducted by a Ministry officer. Nonetheless, NGOs often – verbally or in writing – lobby individual Ministry officials to attend to the interests of affected workers. This often involves: following-up with workers to check if they encounter difficulties during their claims; making requests or demands to individual Ministry officials to properly enforce existing legislation that protects the interests of workers; and requesting individual Ministry officials to make concessions to individual workers (or groups of workers) outside existing labour legislation on humanitarian grounds.

Using NGO support and sporadic casual jobs, workers are able to move work disputes and grievances from the coercive confines of the labour process into the formal complaint mechanisms instituted by the Ministry. By taking to flight, workers are not only fleeing a losing battle with their respective employers but are also seeking to discover and mobilise political resources outside the workplace. NGO assistance provides them with a possible outlet for doing so. While formal complaint mechanisms

\(^{62}\) Workers who are kept in Singapore as prosecution witnesses are allowed to join the ministry’s Temporary Job Scheme (TJS) where they can be hired by employers from certain industries for six months at a time. Workers with work injury and salary claims are not eligible for this scheme.
are a technocratic form of political participation that uses administrative procedures to intentionally narrow the “scope and nature of contestation” (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2007: 795), they represent a far safer arena for workers to contest their work-related disputes as compared to agitation at the workplace.

**The Political Significance of Flight**

The existing literature on flight tends to emphasise various forms of labour desertion, in the context of antebellum slavery (e.g. Camp, 2004); indentured labour (e.g. Behal, 1985) and is even mentioned in studies of guest-worker programmes (Bauder, 2006: 200, 235), as a form of escape from violent and oppressive bonded-labour regimes. Camp’s analysis is more nuanced as she understands these acts of flight and truancy as a simultaneous form of resistance to “the spatial strictures enforced by overseers, passes and slave patrols” (Stubbs, 2006: 1). Similarly, by drawing out the dynamics of the causes and courses of flight among Bangladeshi migrant workers within its structural context, I seek to understand these acts of resistance as more than just an attempt to escape employer coercion.

The understanding of flight as a contentious form of resistance – as opposed to other everyday resistances like work-pacing – comes largely from the context where flight is engendered rather than the primary intentions of the actors (i.e. the workers). Debates on the question of intent in interpreting “resistance” are not new, and I do not wish to revisit them all here. Nevertheless, I tend to side with scholars such as Stoler (1986) and Ortner (1995) who argue that it is more important to “attend to a variety of transformative processes ... regardless of the intentions of the actors or of the presence of very mixed intentions” (Ortner, 1995: 175) rather than with those who categorise resistance based on the intentions of actors (e.g. Fegan, 1986).

The intentions to resist control and exploitation among the workers I have studied can be ambiguous or contradictory. While all cases of flight reflected intense amounts of fear and desperation, some interviewees demonstrated a deliberate intent to challenge their employers in disputes, while others simply ran away to seek other ways of defending their migration projects. When Shakwat left his company’s dormitory for good, he had the clear intention of utilising NGO support to contest deductions made to his wages at MOM (Interview, 09-11-2010). When Rajib ran away following a work injury dispute, his initial intention was actually to find another company that would treat
him better – clearly demonstrating unawareness that he was not legally allowed to switch jobs while in Singapore (Interview, 02-01-2012).

The significance of flight is therefore best understood by the legal-political structural context from which it arises. Flight, as a specific form of labour resistance, is only analytically significant within a context of bonded or unfree labour. The form this “bondage” takes in this context is quite different from the forms of bondage in antebellum slavery or indentured labour systems. In this case, the “bond” between low-skilled migrant workers (i.e. work permit holders) and their employers is a legal-administrative one created by the PAP-state’s guest-worker laws. As I have clearly illustrated in Chapter Two, work permit regulations effectively mean that low-skilled migrant workers have no legal right to remain in Singapore when no longer in the employ of their designated employer. These workers are prohibited from switching jobs while their employers have the unilateral right to terminate their employment and repatriate them as and when they see fit. At the same time, employers are also “bonded” to their workers. Employers are legally required to ensure the repatriation of migrant workers no longer in their employ and risk losing their S$5,000 bond with the Ministry for every migrant worker they hire if they do not do so. The “bondage” of workers to their employers is further complicated by the social costs of their migration projects (debt and social expectations) and the general state of labour repression in Singapore.

It is within such a context that the act of flight can be considered a contentious form of labour resistance. Firstly, flight represents an effective withdrawal of a worker’s labour power, or capacity to work, beyond the reach of their employer. Within this specific context of legal-administrative “bondage”, the migrant worker’s ability to withdraw his labour power beyond the control of his employer is severely curtailed. As I have shown earlier, during disputes, workers attempt to withdraw their labour power to agitate against the use of wage pressures, unpaid wages, under-deployment and the improper management of work injuries in the form of spontaneous work-stoppages and truancy/absenteeism. Because of their weak class capacity, these tactics not only fail to accomplish workers’ objectives, but also bring about harsh reprisals from their employers. Furthermore, these workers do not have the option of switching jobs in Singapore or returning to Bangladesh to pay for a new one. Flight allows these workers to remove themselves (and hence their capacity to work) from spaces or physical locations in which their employers are able to exercise coercive power. Flight is
effectively a refusal to work and a refusal to obey or submit to managerial commands when other forms of refusal – such as work-stoppages and truancy – fail. Flight, thus, allows workers to overcome the structural obstacles posed by their powerlessness in order to withdraw their labour power from the control of their employers.

Secondly, flight represents an overt contestation of an employer’s sovereignty to unilateral repatriation. When construction contractors are unable to harness obedience or submission from individual workers, it becomes in their immediate interest to “dispose” of recalcitrant workers and bring in new, obedient ones. However, employers are not able to simply “dispose” of their terminated workers as they please. They need to ensure the repatriation of these workers in order to retrieve their bond-money from the Ministry and possibly to free up their quotas to hire replacement workers from abroad. Despite these conditions, employers have the liberty to terminate and repatriate their work-permit employees as they please. Worker flight effectively prevents employers from exercising their sovereignty in repatriating undesired workers. When workers take to flight, employer’s ability to “use-and-discard” (to borrow a term from Brenda Yeoh, 2006: 32) these workers is severely compromised. This is evident when workers pre-empt the arrival of repatriation companies by deserting their dormitory; escaping from the custody of repatriation companies; refusing to board their flights; and seeking NGO assistance in getting them released from the custody of repatriation companies.

The last instance brings us to the third point: inasmuch as flight reflects the weak “intrinsic class strength” (Therborn, 1983: 40) of migrant workers in that they have few or no political resources to challenge their employers over disputes, it also reflects these workers’ attempts to search for and mobilise political resources outside the workplace to resist employer coercion. As much as flight involves avoiding the coercive power of bosses, it also involves an attempt to locate and mobilise other social actors who “have power”. This often comes in the form of local migrant worker NGOs who assist workers in translating their workplace grievances into various kinds of formal complaints to the labour Ministry. While these formal complaint mechanisms provide only a very narrow scope for contestation (see Rodan and Jayasuria, 2007), workers, with the continued assistance of NGOs, are usually able to secure work injury compensation, have owed wages paid to them, claim back illegal salary deductions or be allowed to stay on to work on the Ministry’s Temporary Job Scheme as prosecution witnesses for the state.
Lastly, worker flight forces employers to resolve work disputes within the Ministry’s formal-legal framework rather than through intimidation, violence or forced repatriation. I have illustrated that while employers do not primarily use coercion to set workers to work, they often use it to suppress worker agitation during labour disputes. When confronted with open demands by workers and acts of insubordination, employers are seen attempting to “resolve” disputes by verbally and physically intimidating agitators into submission. When intimidation fails, employers attempt to “resolve” the dispute by firing and forcefully repatriating the worker. Workers pre-empt or escape forceful repatriation through flight and seek NGO assistance to lodge formal labour complaints. Once formal claims have been made, employers are unable to forcefully repatriate these workers. Workers receive “special passes” from the Ministry, which give them the legal right to remain in Singapore until their cases have been closed or resolved. While their employers are still legally required to repatriate these workers upon the resolution of their respective claims, they may no longer do so unilaterally. Employers now have to sit through a statutory process during which workers have their claims heard; they need to submit to various labour regulations and answer to things like unreported work injuries, unpaid wages, illegal salary deductions, etc. Some employers may even be investigated and eventually prosecuted for failure to pay salaries, receiving kickbacks and illegal deployment (i.e. deploying a worker to work in an industry not specified on his work permit). While the formal claims process tends to favour employers, worker flight ensures that they do not enjoy the convenience of resolving labour disputes through intimidation and force.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have sought to explain how worker accommodation through obedience-based politics transforms into contentious struggles in the form of flight. I argue that flight, as a form of workplace resistance, is engendered by the same factors of migrant worker powerlessness and the vulnerability of migration projects that ordinarily drive workers to accommodate control. Within the context of labour disputes, however, the constraints of powerlessness and migration projects manifest themselves differently.

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63 Prosecution for the first two tend to be rare. Ministry officials tend to give employers ample opportunities to pay up owing wages while investigations of kickbacks are relatively recent (as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Seven). Through my experience working for HOME for two years, I have noticed that prosecution for illegal deployment tends to be relatively more common although exact figures are not publicly available.
While disputes often pose an immediate threat to migration projects, the political powerlessness of workers ensures that they have few or no opportunities for redress within the workplace. Confrontation, while still risky, becomes compelling because workers have no other means to defend their migration projects. Worker agitation to address disputes not only produces few or no favourable outcomes for them – largely due to their weak intrinsic class strength – but also unleashes the full coercive power of their employers who respond with threats, violence and forceful repatriation. In order to protect their physical well-being and that of their migration projects, workers flee beyond the effective control of their employers and come to connect with local NGOs who assist these workers in channelling their grievances and disputes into the formal complaints mechanism of the state.

I argue that the political significance of flight as a form of labour resistance rests primarily on the “bonded” nature of migrant labour in Singapore, which is ensured by legal-administrative mechanisms of the state. In this context, flight represents the effective withdrawal of labour power beyond the reach of employers when other forms of refusal (work-stoppages and truancy) fail to produce useful outcomes for workers themselves. Flight is also an overt contestation of an employer’s sovereignty to “use-and-discard” undesirable or recalcitrant workers. While flight reflects the weak class capacity of migrant workers to contest control and coercion, it also reflects workers’ attempts to search for and mobilise political resources to protect their own immediate interests. By seeking and mobilising NGO support to channel their grievances and disputes into formal claims and complaints, workers effectively force their employers to resolve work disputes within the formal-legal framework of the Ministry rather than through intimidation or force.

Worker acts of flight, which are the most common forms of contentious resistance among Bangladeshi and other South Asian migrant workers in Singapore, are effectively struggles against occupational immobility and deportability. While migrant workers remain collectively unorganised and individual gains in terms of switching jobs and resisting repatriation remain limited, I will show in the following chapter that such acts of flight produce political opportunities for NGOs to launch further challenges to the existing migrant labour regime.
Chapter Seven

Calling for Regime Reform: The Political Impetus for NGO Activism

What kinds of pressures exist for migrant labour regime reform in Singapore, and how are these pressures related to the shape of production politics that I have documented so far? While instances of self-organisation and collective action among migrant workers had been all but absent, a small number of spontaneous strikes and sit-ins have been observed since 2008. Hence, the only challenge to the migrant labour regime, in recent years, has come in the form of advocacy and activism by a small group of migrant worker NGOs.

NGO activism represents a challenge to the existing migrant labour regime by contesting aspects of migrant labour powerlessness. This includes deportability and occupational immobility and calling for more effective legal protection for low-wage migrant workers against employer practices such as the various wage pressures and forceful repatriation. While the gains of activism are limited, it has pushed Singapore’s Ministry of Manpower to respond by changing its public stance towards particular issues facing migrant workers as well as making small but significant changes to aspects of migrant labour legislation.

In explaining both the gains and limitations of NGO activism, I address arguments made by studies of civil society in Singapore and the broader social movement literature. In different ways, both streams tend to emphasise the importance of civil society space (or the “political opportunity structure”) as influential in determining outcomes of formal and organised contention. In the Singapore context, the limitations of NGO advocacy can be put down to the illiberal or authoritarian nature of the PAP-state and the approaches and strategies deployed by these NGOs. Such approaches, while very useful, are limited in their explanatory potential because their focus is largely on the dynamics surrounding the means of contention while largely ignoring the driving forces behind contention.

There is a need to go beyond the given limitations of civil society space in Singapore to understand the social forces that produce contention and the circumstances under which political space for contention is simultaneously carved out and closed up by civil society and state actors respectively. By conceptualising and situating migrant labour advocacy
in Singapore within Rodan’s (2013) framework of political participation, I seek to explain the form of NGO contention as well as its gains and limitations in relation to *both* political space and the social bases of this contention. This involves connecting the political opportunities and constraints of NGO activism with the contingent and variable outcomes of production politics.

I demonstrate that outcomes of production politics, such as flight, rather than tactical accommodation through obedience-based politics, provide the primary basis through which NGO advocacy is conducted. Through NGO provisions of direct welfare services, instances of flight are translated into NGO case-work which, in turn, forms the basis from which NGOs advocate for labour reform within state-sponsored and autonomous sites of participation. Within the context of an illiberal political environment in which NGOs struggle to collectively mobilise migrant workers or mass citizen support for migrant workers, this “critical mass” of case-work provides NGOs with opportunities to legitimise their advocacy work both within and beyond state-sponsored sites. Conversely, the limitations of advocacy cannot be explained in terms of the means of contention alone. These can stem from the fact that while worker grievances are widespread, dynamics of control within the workplace mean that they do not turn into contentious struggles that culminate in flight. NGO advocacy for migrant workers should not only be understood in in terms of civil society space, but also in terms of the struggles in the labour process that drive advocacy forward.

**Political Opportunities and Civil Society Space in Singapore**

Within the broader social movement literature, the concept of “political opportunity structure” is often used to explain the success or failures of social movements (e.g. Kitschelt, 1986; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; van der Heijden, 1999; Schwenken, 2005; Cammaerts, 2012). The concept, which originates from theorists such as Brockett (1991), Kriesi et. al. (1992), Tarrow (1994) and McAdam (1999), refers to a set of exogenous factors that limit or empower collective actors. While particular components have been modified to accommodate new variables in empirical studies, the political opportunity structure generally comprises: (i) how open or closed institutional arrangements of the state are; (ii) the political stability or coherence of elites; (iii) alliances with elites; and (iv) the state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam, 1999: 27).
In the context of Singapore, the political opportunity structure is particularly striking because it reveals a near-absolute lack of opportunity for NGOs to pursue their agendas. Elites, under a one-party state capitalist regime, are relatively stable and coherent. In the absence of a strong “domestic bourgeoisie” the “technocratic political elites” constitute the solitary political elite group (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2012: 186). NGOs are, thus, unable to forge alliances with other elites because none exist outside the relatively coherent one-party state.

The relatively closed institutional arrangements of the state and the PAP-state’s capacity and propensity for repression are also significant impediments to NGO activism. Laws, such as the Societies Act, the Public Order Act, the Political Donations Act and the Trade Union Ordinance, among others, are used to inhibit political dissent and collective organising (Rodan, 1989, 1996; Singaporeans For Democracy, 2012). Political dissent has been suppressed through the use of draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act (ISA) or law suits against political opponents (ibid). In 1987, for instance, 22 Catholic and lay social workers from the Geylang Catholic Centre for Foreign Workers, who had been advocating for better employment conditions for migrant workers, were detained without trial for varying periods under the ISA for “threatening the state and national interests” (Rodan, 1993: 92; Mauzy and Milne, 2002: 130; Lyons, 2005: 216). Furthermore, grassroots politics has been co-opted or incorporated under PAP party control to the extent that grassroots organisations now serve as the party’s policy mouthpieces and are exclusively used by the party for mass mobilisation and social surveillance (Tan, 2003). Finally, as I have demonstrated in Chapter Two, the labour movement in Singapore has been repressed and then incorporated by the PAP under the party-controlled NTUC umbrella (also see: Rodan, 1989; Deyo, 1991; Hing, 1997; Piper, 2006: 365).

These features of political authoritarianism have a profound impact on the civil society space for independent political expression in Singapore. This is to the extent that some have argued that what we find in Singapore is not labour activism but “labour inactivism” (Sing, 2002; Piper, 2006). In considering the factors that deny workers the freedom of association, together with the political powerlessness of migrant workers as constructed by state policies, it becomes almost impossible for migrant workers in

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64 Rodan and Jayasuria (2012: 186) argue that the interests of Singapore’s domestic bourgeoisie are conditioned by and, hence, dependent on state capitalism.
Singapore to formally self-organise (Piper, 2006: 370). As a result, what we witness is small groups of concerned citizens who attempt to organise themselves to take up the concerns of migrant workers and advocate on their behalf (ibid: 371; Ford and Piper, 2007: 74-75).

The recent literature on migrant labour advocacy in Singapore has almost solely focused on migrant domestic worker issues (Lyons, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009; Piper, 2005, 2006; Ford and Piper, 2007; Yee and Lyons, 2009, Elias, 2010a) and has not sufficiently reflected the advocacy work done on behalf of non-domestic migrant workers, such as those in the construction, shipbuilding, conservancy and services sector. This is hardly surprising given that the two main advocacy groups, the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2), had, until the mid/late 2000s, concentrated most of their limited resources on domestic worker issues. Despite some significantly different working conditions and, hence, advocacy issues faced by domestic and non-domestic workers – the fact that domestic workers are not covered by the Employment Act as well as differences in their respective “labour processes” spring to mind – some of the arguments made, particularly with regard to civil society space, need to be considered here.

While drawn from a different theoretical basis and covering different empirical ground, the works on migrant labour advocacy in Singapore present arguments that are somewhat similar to the social movements literature in that they explain the success or failures of advocacy by evaluating the means of contention. They tend to argue that the impact of labour NGOs activities in Singapore has been “comparatively muted” in contrast to similar ones in Hong Kong (Ford and Piper, 2007: 75) where migrant domestic workers have been active at the grassroots level in self-organising and staging demonstrations (see: Constable, 2009; Hsia, 2009). Similarly, the gains that Singaporean NGOs have made in terms of securing migrant rights are also considered to be modest or limited (Lyons, 2005, 2009; Ford and Piper, 2007; Elias, 2010a). The literature tends to broadly explain these limitations in Singapore in terms of the limited civil society space available for these NGOs to do their work (Lyons, 2005, 2009; Piper, 2006; Ford and Piper, 2007; Elias, 2010a). For instance, Lyons (2005: 251) points out that the Societies Act, which NGOs are required to register under, prohibits them from engaging in any “political activity” which effectively suppresses many of the more contentious activities of these NGOs. The argument that political space significantly
restricts NGO advocacy is most vividly made by Lyons (2009) when she states that, “opportunities for NGOs to advance their causes depend in large part on the extent to which their goals are congruent with the state’s own ideology and interest” (ibid: 94).

At the same time, the literature offers additional factors to explain the limitations of migrant labour advocacy, mostly focusing on the limitations of transnational networks with NGOs outside of Singapore and the approach or strategies of these groups. Scholars such as Lyons (2006, 2009) and Piper (2006) tend to emphasise that given the lack of civil society space in Singapore, transnational networks and alliances have the potential to shape the “landscape of migrant labour advocacy” by “circumventing the tight grips of governments” (Piper, 2006: 376). In other words, they argue that the formation of strong transnational links with global or regional NGOs has the potential to reinvigorate the relatively stagnant state of civil society in Singapore. Lyons (2009: 109) claims that one of the reasons why migrant labour advocacy in Singapore remains limited is that “a transnational phenomenon” (i.e. labour migration) is treated by local NGOs as a “local issue to be solved at the national level”. She explains the lack of transnational “scaling up” in terms of the relative youth of HOME and TWC2 and “an inherent conservatism that reflects the nature of civil-society/state interactions in Singapore” (ibid). Closely related to the latter point, is the argument that the limitations of advocacy are also related to the specific strategies used by these NGOs (Lyons, 2005, 2007, 2009). For instance, Lyons argues that through their advocacy, NGOs failed to challenge dominant state discourses on the civil society, class, gender and citizenship (2005: 239-240). She further argues that advocacy strategies (which largely relate to migrant domestic workers) tend to use discourses that reformulate labour rights into “productivity” and “health” issues (Lyons, 2009: 106) as opposed to a discourse of universal human rights which can be regarded as “progressive” (Lyons, 2009: 107). In short, factors such as the lack of transnational networks as well as the limited advocacy strategies of NGOs are also related to the limited nature of civil society space in Singapore.

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For a concerted debate on this issue, see the exchange between Yee and Lyons (2009). Yee argues that such NGO strategies are necessary given tight state controls on political expression while Lyons argues that these strategies reproduce dominant (state) discourses on gender, citizenship and civil society. Crucially, neither deeply explores the driving forces behind advocacy on behalf of migrant domestic workers.
The political opportunity structure and, hence, the severely restricted civil society space under which NGOs operate are indeed significant factors in explaining the limited shape of migrant labour advocacy we witness in Singapore. The closed political opportunity structure and consequently, the limited nature of political space for contestation mean that independent migrant labour advocacy in Singapore is severely inhibited. This fact is apparent and, indeed, forms the backdrop of my analysis of migrant labour advocacy. However, these different approaches only offer us an understanding of what political space is not available. There is still a need to explain what spaces, if any, do exist – how these spaces are carved out and what is the precise political nature of these spaces, especially in relation to the Singapore state. While focusing almost solely on the means of contention, these approaches also pay little attention to the driving forces or root causes of civil society contention. While they present a range of factors to explain how activism is enhanced or impeded, they do not address the “social foundations” or the political impetus that drives activism (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2007, 2012). In other words, what are the dynamics underlying the extent and nature of civil society space or opportunity structures?

With regard to the latter, the literature on labour politics provides an alternative way of looking at the development of social movements (e.g. Thompson, 1966; Sewell, 1980; Metcalfe, 1988; Koo, 2001). These works tend to focus on the driving forces behind change – experiences of exploitation, poverty, indignity, etc. Koo (2001), for instance, views collective actors such as trade and student unions and faith-based organisations as conduits or “catalysts” of change that helped “transform a structurally determined potentiality into an actuality” (ibid: 99). Rather than focusing on the unions or churches alone, Koo locates the causes of the collective struggles of Korean workers in their brutal experiences of exploitation in the labour process (ibid: 46-68). Koo, like the others in this stream, locates the primary driving force for labour agitation, not so much in their collective organisations⁶⁶, but in workers’ experiences in the labour process. Perspectives like these draw attention to the political impetus, or driving forces, of labour activism rather than only focusing on the means.

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⁶⁶ This body of literature does consider these forms of labour organising as highly significant, but not primarily in terms of the political space within which they operate. Rather these organisations are significant because of their role in developing a sense of collective identity from shared grievances as well as providing a base for the development of working class power.
However, there is a great deal of contingency between “structurally determined” experiences of exploitation and actual outcomes of struggle in the labour process. As I have shown in the past three chapters, the outcomes of production politics are variable and contingent. These various outcomes – such as flight or tactical accommodation through obedience – can have differing implications for the nature of political space available for NGOs to challenge the migrant labour regime. And indeed I show that they do. There is a need, therefore, to draw connections between the social conditions behind NGO contention and the political constraints and opportunities surrounding this contention. This means that the dynamics of NGO contention have to be interrogated further in order to relate issues of political space for contention with the social conditions that make contention necessary and shape the forms that this can take.

**Modes of Political Participation**

In order to draw this connection, I adopt Jayasuria and Rodan (2007) and Rodan’s (2013) framework for different modes of political participation. A mode of participation refers to a set of institutional structures and ideologies that “shape the inclusion and exclusion of individuals and groups in the political process” (Jayasuria and Rodan, 2007: 773-4). In other words, these different modes attempt to shape the form of political engagement between states and civil society actors by determining who can participate, and how, and whether participants can challenge policies or advance alternative views and ideologies.

Jayasuria and Rodan (2007) and Rodan (2013) identify four sites of political participation differentiated according to their level of inclusion and sites of participation. Sites of participation can be state-sponsored or autonomous from the state and the levels of inclusion may be restricted to individual actors or may include collective actors as well. Here I would like to focus on three of these modes. Civil society expression (collective and autonomous from the state) tends to be relatively limited in authoritarian regimes such as Singapore (Rodan, 2013: 24) but nonetheless does exist, particularly in the form of women’s, environmental and migrant-labour advocacy groups (Lyons and Gomez, 2005). The significant point about these organisations is that they “have not pursued agendas to fundamentally transform the established political order” but are generally geared towards reform and the promotion and protection of various rights and collective goods (Rodan, 2013: 25). Under societal
incorporation (collective and state-sponsored), civil society groups are deliberately selected by government for consultation over public policy issues. However, this engagement is not based on democratic principles such as representation or accountability, but is “guided by a technocratic conception of politics as problem solving” (ibid: 26). Finally, administrative incorporation (individual and state sponsored) involves state attempts to resolve or mitigate political conflicts by framing and managing these conflicts in technical and administrative terms, effectively depoliticising them (ibid).

These modes are ideal-types – in practice, their boundaries can be blurred and social actors may often operate in different sites or engage in various modes. Furthermore, state-sponsored sites, and their associated modes, do not always turn out according to state agendas. As these modes can sometimes operate at the intersection of state-sponsored and autonomous sites, they can often turn into sites of contestation even though the parameters of contestation may be limited (Hutchison, 2007: 854). The objective here is to explain the substantive form of NGO contestation within this schema and why it takes this specific form. By mapping out the substantive nature of advocacy within this framework, we are able to address issues of political space as well as the “underlying social foundations associated with the opportunities and constraints” (Rodan, 2013: 26; also see: Rodan and Jayasuria, 2012) of migrant labour advocacy. By examining the basis and dynamics of NGO contention as well as state responses, I seek to explain the form contention takes and the significance of the impact contention has had on the migrant labour regime in Singapore.

The Substantive Form of Migrant Labour Advocacy in Singapore

While a host of faith-based (Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants & Itinerant People, St. Francis Worker’s Centre), women’s rights (AWARE, UNIFEM), human rights (Think Centre) and migrant labour rights (HOME, TWC2) organisations have been highlighted in the literature with regard to migrant labour advocacy in Singapore, this chapter will focus on the work of HOME and TWC2. Since 2005, these have been the only two organisations constantly and consistently advocating on behalf of migrant workers.

67 See Piper (2005) for a broad outline of the activities of these various groups and Lyons (2009: 97-103) for a more updated view of the activities of TWC2 and HOME.
HOME and TWC2 were both founded in 2004 and were initially largely focused on migrant domestic worker issues. While HOME was registered under the Societies Act in that year, TWC2 was only formally registered after a year-long public awareness campaign (Lyons, 2005: 97). TWC2 was formed out of an informal network of concerned individuals and representatives of local welfare organisations called “The Working Committee 2” which sought to address local attitudes and treatment of migrant domestic workers (ibid). HOME, on the other hand, was founded by Bridget Lew Tan, the former coordinator of the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI; the Catholic Church’s ministry for migrant workers in Singapore that still exists) (ibid: 100). Despite some differences in the past advocacy strategies and public rhetoric, both these NGOs are focused on two broad and related issues – the welfare of migrant workers and migrant labour rights. Broadly, both organisations seek to address these aims through the direct provision of welfare services (i.e. direct services) and advocacy within both state-sponsored and autonomous sites.

Direct services have always been intimately connected to advocacy work. HOME runs two helpdesks – one for migrant domestic workers and another for other blue collar migrant workers (such as construction workers) – as well as two shelters, one for men and the other for women. TWC2 runs one helpdesk that is open to all migrant workers as well as a soup kitchen for migrant workers on special passes (i.e. workers with outstanding claims or complaints against their employers). Both NGOs also operate emergency help-lines. Besides providing migrant workers with food and shelter, these NGOs provide legal advice and assistance to workers in need through their helpdesk and help-lines services. As I have shown in Chapter Six, the most significant form of legal assistance provided to migrant workers comes in the form of assisting workers in lodging formal complaints or claims against their employers at the Ministry of Manpower. NGO staff assist workers by briefing them about their labour rights guaranteed by employment and migrant-labour laws; assisting them with documentation with regard to their claims (i.e. filling up forms, advice on what types of evidence the Ministry requires such as medical certificates, salary slips, time-cards, bank transaction

68 While their substantive focus is on migrant domestic workers and migrant non-domestic workers (such as those in the construction and shipbuilding industry) they have also taken up the concerns of asylum seekers, fishermen and victims of human trafficking.
records etc.); teaching and assisting workers how to make claims/complaints; and engaging with Ministry officers over the expedition of these claims.

Both NGOs have always engaged in advocating the Ministry to reform migrant labour laws (i.e. greater legal protection for migrant workers) and to be more attendant to the welfare of these workers. HOME has traditionally conducted its advocacy within state-sponsored channels such as through formal complaints mechanisms and closed-door meetings, while the bulk of TWC2’s advocacy work has been more publicly vocal and outside these channels (Lyons, 2005: 101). However, over the past few years, the forms of advocacy of these two NGOs have largely converged – HOME has increased its level of public advocacy outside state-sponsored channels and TWC2 has increased its engagement with Ministry officials in its advocacy activities. In recent times, these NGOs have also started collaborating on advocacy issues. In May 2009, a coalition called Solidarity for Migrant Workers was formed comprising of HOME, TWC2 and a small arts-based NGO called Migrant Voices in order to consolidate resources for advocacy (Channel NewsAsia, 24-05-2009; The Straits Times, 25-05-2009).

The substantive form of migrant labour advocacy within different sites of political participation is summarised in Table 2 below. While individualized political expressions are one of various modes of participation used by individuals and activists, they are often used to complement advocacy at collective levels of inclusion. In this section I will only elaborate on societal incorporation and civil society expression. The former will also be discussed in relation to administrative incorporation, where only workers participate but with the assistance of NGOs.
Table 2: The forms of migrant labour advocacy situated within the modes of political participation framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Inclusion</th>
<th>Sites of Participation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>State and trans-state sponsored</strong></td>
<td><strong>Autonomous from state</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual</strong></td>
<td><strong>Administrative Incorporation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Individualized Political Expression</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Workers lodging claims within the formal complaints mechanisms at MOM with NGO assistance</td>
<td>• Blogs which advocate for migrant worker rights, among others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Use of social media by individuals and NGO activists(^\text{69}) to highlight abuses and violations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective</strong></td>
<td><strong>Societal Incorporation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Civil Society Expression</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Para-bureaucratic interventions into complaints mechanisms</td>
<td>• Public education and awareness-raising of employment and welfare issues facing migrant workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Closed-door meetings and discussions with MOM</td>
<td>• Publicly lobbying Ministers and the Ministry to reform existing labour laws through letters to the press/open letters and action-research reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lobbying case officers and department heads to apply existing laws or to make exceptions in favour of workers</td>
<td>• Reporting labour and human rights violations to global stakeholders such as UN Human Rights Commission and US Department of State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lobbying divisional directors and the Minister of State to improve enforcement and reform existing labour laws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Problem solving”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Rodan (2013: 25)

\(^{69}\) Often in a personal capacity
Advocacy within state-sponsored sites: societal incorporation

NGO advocacy within state-sponsored sites tends to take two related forms – para-bureaucratic interventions into complaints mechanisms and closed-door meetings with Ministry officials. In order to better appreciate the dynamics of these interventions and meetings, we need to understand how the formal complaints mechanisms within the Ministry work. When workers file formal complaints over wage issues or work injuries, the Ministry initiates a compulsory “conciliation” process where, instead of passing judgement on the dispute, an officer attempts to facilitate a compromise between worker and employer. It is usually at the discretion of the case officer to refer the dispute for arbitration (i.e. labour court) if and when conciliation fails to produce an amicable agreement.

The conciliation and arbitration process is largely framed by the PAP’s ideological “tripartite” framework, which involves government, workers and employers working together to promote harmonious industrial relations. In effect, Singaporean “tripartism” is an extension of the PAP’s co-option and political control of collective labour as it determines which collective actors are able to participate in the resolution of industrial disputes. At a collective bargaining level, the “parties” are effectively the Ministry of Manpower, the PAP-controlled union umbrella NTUC and the Singapore National Employers Federation. In the conciliation of individual employment disputes, only individual workers (who have lodged complaints), Ministry officers and individual employers are allowed to participate (Heng, 2008).

NGOs, as “voluntary welfare organisations” (VWOs) registered under the Societies Act, are explicitly not allowed to participate in the conciliation process (ibid: 3). They are also explicitly prohibited from behaving like a trade union or engaging in political activities under the said Act. In this sense, they are unable to legally represent workers in their claims or participate in collective bargaining.

While NGOs are legally excluded from the bureaucratic process, they are still able to make para-bureaucratic interventions into the complaints mechanism as welfare organisations. This can only happen when worker complaints are formally referred to the Ministry by NGOs. These referrals can be done in person, where NGO staff or volunteers personally accompany the worker to make a complaint at the Ministry buildings. More often, however, these referrals come in the form of emails or letters, or
through official complaints forms which are usually faxed to Ministry departments from NGO premises. Official complaints forms – which still exist for work injury complaints and until 2008 for salary-related complaints – received by the Ministry are formally acknowledged to be referred by HOME and TWC2 when workers’ contact details are listed as those of the NGOs. The Ministry formally recognises that these NGOs are providing welfare assistance to complaining workers – legal assistance; shelter; food – and formally correspond with these NGOs over these cases. Formal correspondence (i.e. notice to attend conciliation meetings) from the Ministry to workers is also often sent to NGO addresses.

The formal recognition of NGOs as welfare providers allows these groups to make para-bureaucratic interventions into the conciliation process by corresponding with individual case officers and their department heads to call for more stringent adherence to labour laws during conciliation meetings. NGOs also “train” and brief workers before these meetings so that workers are more aware of their employment rights and are able to assert themselves during these meetings (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013). When workers return from conciliation meetings, activists ring up or write to case officers to press for more favourable terms of settlement or ask officials to ensure that the conciliation process does not overtly undermine the interests of individual workers. As most of these issues involve the payment of medical leave wages and incapacity compensation for work injury cases and salary disputes over unpaid wages and overtime, rest-day and notice pay, NGOs argue that employers should not get away with having to settle disputes at terms that are less favourable to the worker than those provided for by existing labour laws.70

At other times, para-bureaucratic lobbying within the formal complaints channels involve NGOs asking case-officers and their department or division heads to make exceptions where relevant labour legislation does not exist to protect workers’ interests. A good example of this was during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008/09 when large groups of Bangladeshi construction and shipyard workers faced gross under-deployment and sought the assistance of HOME and TWC2. Under-deployment, while

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70 Throughout my two years working at HOME’s helpdesk, I observed that many workers choose to settle for terms below statutory standards. There are many individual reasons for this but most tend to centre on the claimant finding the conciliation officer unsupportive of them and not wanting the case to drag on for too long. NGOs respect these decisions and find it difficult to pressure the Ministry further given that the claimant has already chosen to settle terms.
a major problem for workers, does not usually contravene labour or migrant labour
laws. While some under-deployed workers had valid complaints of illegal deployment
which could be taken up by Foreign Manpower Management Division (FMMD)
officers, many other complaints lodged by NGOs (especially earlier batches of workers)
were deemed by the Ministry to have “no case”. NGOs responded, among other ways,
through lobbying within the formal complaints channels for the Ministry to make an
exception by allowing these workers to seek new employers without having to be
repatriated so that they may be given an opportunity to cover their debts. This amounts
to contesting occupational immobility. While Change-of-Employers (COE) are not
allowed for shipyard workers and only allowed for construction workers under
extremely stringent and complicated conditions, NGOs argued that an exception had to
be made given the plight of these workers71 (The Online Citizen, 15-01-2009). While
only formally recognised as welfare organisations, NGOs are able to make para-
bureaucratic interventions into the complaints process and turn an administrative site of
participation into a site of contestation.

Closed-door meetings with department and division heads of the Ministry can be seen
as a form of participation that extends from these para-bureaucratic interventions. At
these meetings, which can be initiated by either party, NGO representatives follow-up
on earlier interventions by highlighting issues relating to existing labour laws and the
way they are enforced in practice in relation to particular worker complaints. NGOs use
this opportunity to lobby department and division heads to either recommend changes in
regulations/legislation to their superiors or to directly modify the way existing laws are
being applied in conciliation and arbitration. Ministry officials, on the other hand, use
these meetings to reassert the bureaucratic status-quo by justifying why particular laws
and administrative procedures – for example, the process of conciliation before
arbitration – are necessary. Ministry officials also use these meetings for fact-finding as
NGOs are often able to highlight a range of employment and legal issues facing migrant
workers which the Ministry may not be sensitised to. This would allow officials to
consider the extent to which these issues can be resolved and incorporated within their
existing administrative framework. While these meetings were previously ad hoc and
tended to centre on particular and immediate issues, they have now become more

71 While NGO calls for COE were initially rejected by the Ministry – initial batches of under-deployed
workers were repatriated without benefits – the latter subsequently did make this exception. The gains of
advocacy during the GFC are further elaborated on later in this section and in subsequent sections.
regular and high-profile. In mid-2011, just months after Tan Chuan Jin took up the
Minister of State for Manpower portfolio, the Minister himself called a round-table
meeting with migrant labour NGOs in order to familiarise himself with these issues.
Three months later, TWC2 president Russell Heng invited the Minister to the NGOs’
Cuff Road soup kitchen to raise further concerns and proposals for legislative reforms
(TWC2, 05-11-2011).

Advocacy in autonomous sites

Migrant labour advocacy outside state-sponsored sites tends to take three forms, the
latter two of which are the most pertinent to this discussion. Firstly, NGOs engage in
public awareness campaigns in order to raise employment and welfare issues facing
migrant workers at large. Public awareness may come in the form of, or be an extension
of, concerted and formalised campaigns or talks/presentations in local schools. HOME’s
then executive director, Jolovan Wham, felt that the latter were particularly salient in
drumming-up mass citizen support in the future – “since most Singaporeans don’t really
care about migrant worker issues, it’s best to start with the future. Hopefully, when they
[the students] grow up they will be more supportive [of our work]” (Interview, 03-04-
2013).

More significantly however, NGOs publicly lobby the Ministry for labour reform
through letters and comments to the state-controlled and independent internet
press/media as well as through the occasional open letters to government ministries,
statutory boards and even state-owned/state-linked companies such as the SMRT
Corporation Ltd. HOME’s open letter to SMRT in the wake of a bus drivers’ strike in
2012 (publighthouse.sg, 10-12-2012) and HOME and TWC2’s joint open letter to the
National Wages Council calling for the statutory board to ensure “decent wages” for all
migrant workers (HOME and TWC2, 05-04-2011) are the most recent examples.

Public lobbying is also done through action research reports which are always launched
with an open press conference. “Justice Delayed, Justice Denied” (prepared by HOME
and TWC2) released in 2010 and “The Exploitation of Migrant Chinese Construction
Workers in Singapore” (prepared by HOME) released in 2011 are two recent examples
of this. The employment conditions of migrant workers are highlighted and
recommendations made to reform various aspects of migrant labour laws and the nature
of enforcement. Public lobbying at the local level effectively attempts to create public
awareness among citizens and residents of the suffering and problems faced by migrant workers, and places external local pressure on the Ministry to act on individual cases or reform migrant labour laws.

NGOs also engage in the (public and publicised) reporting of human and labour rights violations to global stakeholders such as the UN Council of Human Rights and the US Department of State. NGO input has been a significant constituent of the US Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons country report on Singapore from 2009 to present. Between 2010 and 2012, NGOs have used this channel of reporting to highlight how issues of indebtedness among workers, illegal withholding of their wages and passports and the use of forceful repatriation indicate signs of trafficking and forced labour (US Department of State, 2010, 2011, 2012). The Solidarity for Migrant Workers coalition (HOME, TWC2 and Migrant Voices) also makes joint submissions to the UN Council of Human Rights for Singapore’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (The Straits Times, 30-09-2010; TODAY, 01-11-2010). Singapore’s UPR took place, for the first time it seems, in May 2011. In their submissions, the migrant labour coalition highlighted a broad range of human rights issues concerning migrant workers including barriers to labour justice, forceful confinement and repatriation, barriers to the freedom of association of workers, and the occupational immobility and deportability of migrant workers. Recommendations covering the administration of labour justice, freedom of movement, conditions of work and right to social security were also made in the submission. NGO reporting of rights violations are attempts to put external pressure from global agencies on the Ministry to implement various reforms of migrant labour laws (Solidarity for Migrant Workers, 2011).

**NGO demands and recommendations**

NGOs tend to strategically use different discourses and rhetoric when advocating within separate sites. Within state-sponsored sites the emphasis tends to be on the enforcement of existing laws and on the welfare of migrant workers. The emphasis tends to be on welfare in public outreach and on human and labour rights when reporting to external agencies. Despite this, their substantive demands and/or recommendations – all of which are directed at the Singapore government – are largely consistent within all these sites. Broadly speaking, NGOs call for the reform of broad labour and migrant labour laws and the manner in which they are enforced in order to be more attendant to the
welfare of migrant workers and offer them greater legal protection against a known range of coercive employer strategies such as particular wage pressures and forceful repatriation. Some of their more significant demands include:

(i) Outlawing and prosecuting repatriation companies for wrongful confinement and forced repatriation of workers

(ii) Repealing all work permit regulations that give employers the unilateral right to cancel the work permit of workers

(iii) Liberalisation of the Change-of-Employer (COE) regulations to allow workers to change employers without having to be repatriated

(iv) Negotiating multilateral agreements with sending states to regulate recruitment practices

(v) Abolishing the practice of blacklisting workers unless they are convicted of criminal offences

(vi) The enactment of minimum wage laws to ensure that all workers, especially migrants, are remunerated fairly

(vii) Abolishing time-bars on Employment Act claims

(viii) Stricter enforcement of existing labour laws – in particular the Employment Act and the Work Injury Compensation Act – to give workers more effective legal protection against employer practices, including increasing penalties for not paying wages on time

(Sources: The Online Citizen, 15-01-2009; HOME and TWC2, 2010, 2011; HOME, 2011; Solidarity for Migrant Workers, 2011)

The limited impact of advocacy

It now becomes clear that NGO advocacy represents a challenge to the existing migrant labour regime. Through state-sponsored and autonomous sites of participation, NGO calls for regime reform in protecting the rights and welfare of migrant workers effectively challenges key aspects of the migrant labour regime such as migrant worker occupational immobility and deportability. Despite overt calls for regime reform, the Ministry has only made small tweaks to migrant labour laws while more general labour laws such as the Employment Act and the Work Injury Compensation Act have remained unchanged. Activists have described years of lobbying the Ministry as frustrating as they “keep saying the same things but to different civil servants each
time” (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013). Yet, these modifications are significant because they reflect how the Ministry has changed its stance on particular issues facing migrant workers, and hence warrant some attention.

While no punitive action has been taken against repatriation companies, the Ministry has made a significant shift in its position on these activities. In late 2011, several Ministry officials led by the Minister of State for Manpower, Tan Chuan Jin, visited three repatriation companies and issued them with warnings with regard to the treatment of workers during repatriation (Ministry of Manpower, 21-11-2011; The Straits Times, 15-12-2011). Employers were also publicly warned, in a press release by the Ministry, that action would be taken against anyone repatriating their migrant workers without a proper settlement of their wages (ibid). While the impact of these warnings are debatable – and NGOs were unhappy with the Ministry’s limited response – it is worth mentioning that one of the repatriation companies announced that it would be ceasing operations following the Minister’s visit (ibid).

The Ministry also changed its formal positions on kickbacks. Before 2009, the Ministry often ignored or deflected allegations of kickbacks by migrant workers and NGOs, claiming that these were personal issues and, because recruitment fees were paid in sending states, this was outside of their jurisdiction (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013). In the wake of the GFC spill-out and faced with over 1,500 agitated under-deployed workers in debt and the ensuing NGO pressure, the Ministry soon prohibited kickbacks under work permit regulations (Ministry of Manpower, 01-07-2008, 2011). With the amendment of EFMA in parliament, in 2012, kickbacks were soon criminalised – i.e. violating employers are now liable for prosecution rather than just given an administrative fine (Ministry of Manpower, 13-08-2012, 11-09-2012). The Ministry also made it compulsory, under work permit regulations, for employers to pay basic wages to their migrant workers when not deployed (Ministry of Manpower, 2011).

While the Ministry did not formally amend its COE framework, the under-deployed workers who had made complaints through the NGOs were given conditional permission\textsuperscript{72} to source new employers without having to face repatriation. More recently, in July 2013, the Ministry has initiated moves towards reforming the COE

\textsuperscript{72} The Ministry’s conditions were that the workers had a given period of time (less than a month) to source for their own jobs within their existing industry sector (such as construction or shipbuilding) and that their potential employers had to be eligible to hire additional workers.
framework by calling for public feedback to review “the circumstances under which foreign workers could be allowed to change employers” (Channel NewsAsia, 22-07-2013). The Ministry also started showing an interest in recruitment practices in sending countries even though no multilateral agreements were ever signed. In the wake of the GFC, internal research on recruitment practices in Bangladesh, China and India were initiated while Ministry delegations subsequently visited NGOs in Bangladesh (among other sending countries) to learn more about recruitment practices there (The Straits Times, 18-12-2012).

The final piece of evidence that proves the impact of NGO advocacy was that, in early 2009, the PAP-controlled union umbrella, NTUC, set up a Government Organised Nongovernmental Organisation (GONGO) called the Migrant Workers Centre (MWC) headed by PAP Member of Parliament, Yeo Guat Kwang. Providing the same direct services as HOME and TWC2, the MWC assisted the Ministry through the provision of welfare and assistance for migrant workers without the pressure of independent advocacy (The Straits Times, 31-01-2009, 03-09-2009).

Production Politics and the Impetus for Advocacy

From the above section, we see that migrant labour advocacy seeks to secure labour reforms through participating in both state-sanctioned sites (through para-bureaucratic interventions) and autonomous ones. Despite all its limitations, advocacy has made some impact, and this is evident in small amendments to migrant labour laws and the Ministry’s newfound attendance to issues of recruitment and forced repatriation. At the same time, there has been no fundamental change (or even reform) to the migrant labour regime – migrant workers still lack legal-political rights and do not have the ability to organise collectively while their occupational immobility and deportability are only somewhat mitigated by these small shifts. However, crucial questions remain. Why have state-sponsored sites, within an authoritarian regime, opened up in this particular manner which allows NGOs to combine autonomous campaigning with para-bureaucratic lobbying? And how do we explain the particular impact, or the lack thereof, that advocacy has had on the migrant labour regime? To answer these questions, I utilise the explanatory potential of production politics by linking their variable and contingent outcomes to the form of NGO contention and its impacts within an illiberal political regime.
It is the manner in which production politics take shape and play out in the labour process that determines the extent to which NGOs can contest the migrant labour regime. Specifically, it is the outcome of flight, rather than the perpetuation of obedience-politics, that provides the primary basis through which NGO advocacy is conducted. Workplace issues related to worker flight, such as disputes over work injuries, under-deployment, unpaid wages and wage pressures, determine the direction NGO advocacy takes. More crucially, contentious labour process outcomes such as flight allow NGOs to launch this two-pronged challenge to existing migrant labour laws and practices. The translation of instances of flight through NGO case-work allows these groups to carve out political spaces for advocacy. The “critical mass” of case-work also provides NGOs with opportunities to leverage on the Ministry’s public image, loopholes in labour laws and enforcement and to appeal to the conscience of individual officials, all of which can make advocacy more impactful.

The “critical mass” of NGO case-work

While advocacy, particularly within state-sponsored sites, is primarily issue-based, it allows NGOs to relate these issues to the lack of legal protection for migrant workers which can often be detrimental to their mental and physiological well-being. These issues do not come out of nowhere, nor do they even emerge from the widespread grievances that workers have in the workplace (cf. Koo, 2001). Rather, these issues are largely derived specifically from instances of flight which, in turn, are created when the effort-reward bargain between workers and their employers—in the form of obedience politics—break down and workers are compelled to seek outside help when their overt forms of resistance lead to the unleashing of employer coercion.

The ability of NGOs to lobby for the outlawing of repatriation companies comes out of successful worker resistance against forced repatriation. Forceful repatriation, or the threat of repatriation, is not usually used by employers to set workers to work but rather as a strategy to resolve work-related disputes. NGO calls for a minimum wage and the tightening of labour law enforcement is derived from the various overt conflicts—rather than simply worker grievances—over wage pressures in the workplace, many of which are illegal but regularly practiced. Worker grievances alone, while widespread, do not provide the impetus for advocacy. The breakdown of the politics of obedience, and subsequently worker flight to NGOs, does. The huge waves of under-deployed and
indebted workers during the GFC allowed NGOs to call for the liberalisation of the COE framework, the repealing of employers’ unilateral right to terminate work permits and multilateral agreements with sending states. In the practice of NGO activism, “welfare” and “rights” issues cannot be separated. The outcomes of contentious politics in the workplace tend to have a detrimental effect on the well-being of migrant workers which, in turn, makes it important for NGOs – even if they may be more concerned about welfare rather than advocacy – to advocate for greater employment rights (cf. Lyons, 2009). Viewed this way, the provision of direct services by NGOs, in the form of legal assistance, shelter and food, takes on a greater political significance than just welfare or “fire-fighting”. Direct services constitute a nexus where particular outcomes of production politics, such as flight, are transformed into the basis for advocacy.

A crucial link between outcomes such as flight and advocacy within complaints mechanisms is that many of the issues that lead to flight or surrounding the circumstances of flight involve violations of labour laws on the part of employers. The fact that work injuries have not been reported, wages not paid according to statutory standards or that workers may have been deployed to work in industrial sectors outside those stipulated on their work permits allow NGOs not only to assist workers in lodging complaints but also to carry their advocacy into state-sponsored sites. For instance, NGOs are able to make strong – public and closed-door – demands for the Ministry to act against repatriation companies not simply because they violate human rights (and the government tends to ignore such clamour) but because many cases of forced repatriation actually involve legitimate labour disputes, which gives workers the right to remain in Singapore and lodge cases through the formal complaints mechanisms.

Leverage

While the closed civil-society space in Singapore does not allow these NGOs much formal political leverage, the “critical mass” of case-work, created through the interface of flight and direct services, allows NGOs to leverage on the government’s public image (of governing through “rule of law”), loopholes in labour laws and enforcement as well as appealing to the conscience of individual officials. Admittedly, these forms of leverage are generally weak. Nonetheless, the “critical mass” of case-

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73 As I have pointed out in earlier sections, NGOs registered under the Societies Act or the Companies Act are explicitly prohibited from engaging in any form of political activity.
work that NGOs bring with them into the complaints mechanisms prompted the Ministry to open up channels of engagement and modify their responses to some migrant labour issues as well as create opportunities to lobby in autonomous sites.

As case-work gives them a foot in the door, NGOs are able to appeal to ideas of compassion, justice and fairness of individual officers regarding the manner in which these cases are expedited. More significantly, NGOs play on the government’s public image of being administratively competent and strictly adhering to the rule-of-law. Letters to the press and global reporting allow NGOs to publicly highlight government loopholes in enforcement and labour legislation. Used in tandem with advocacy within state-sponsored sites, this potentially creates pressure for the Ministry to accede to NGO demands or requests. In an interview, HOME’s then executive director Jolovan Wham admitted that he still could not be sure if this approach works, “but the more a case is publicised, [we noticed] the more attention the Ministry pays to it, the more favourable the outcome” (Interview, 03-04-2013). Under such circumstances, the Ministry would certainly prefer issues to be hammered out in closed-door meetings rather than through the media and hence accedes to and actively creates channels of engagement with NGOs.

Case-work also provides NGOs with opportunities to leverage on international pressure against the Ministry. NGO submissions for the US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Reports (from 2009) as well as Singapore’s first Universal Periodic Review by the United Nations Human Rights Council are not only drawn from principled objections to various migrant worker laws but also from the large numbers of assistance cases (which also include cases of domestic workers, victims of sex-trafficking, refugees/asylum-seekers and fishermen) accumulated over the years. In the former, issues of worker indebtedness, withholding of salaries and forceful repatriation become framed as indicators of forced labour and trafficking. Furthermore, the reports indicate that the Singapore government has not done enough in terms of prosecution, prevention and protection. This potentially hurts the image of the government, especially when Singapore has been ranked in “Tier 2” together with countries like Sri Lanka while smaller nations like Slovakia are ranked at “Tier 1” (US Department of State, 2010, 2011, 2012). Many of the small changes the Ministry made, outlined in the earlier section, can be partly explained by the pressure produced by NGO reporting, which is largely driven by cases compiled from the provision of direct services.
Another reason why the Ministry opens up channels of engagement is that NGO participation within state-sponsored sites – necessarily backed by case-work – proves to be expedient for the Ministry’s technocratic politics of “problem solving” (Rodan, 2013: 26). Because NGOs work on the ground and are more approachable for workers, they can be more attendant to isolated or widespread workplace disputes as well as what the Ministry terms “employer malpractice”. They are thus able (and certainly keen) to highlight the widespread flouting of particular labour laws and labour abuses to the Ministry. Given the credibility of the PAP-government as competent and adhering to the rule-of-law, the Ministry would be keen to open up channels of engagement – by channelling these issues through the complaints mechanisms or holding closed-door meetings – rather than having these cases reported in the local and international press. In the wake of migrant labour unrest during the GFC, NGOs used state-sponsored sites to pressure the Ministry to address the issues faced by under-deployed workers. The Ministry, for its part, used NGO information to gauge the extent of under-deployment and collaborated with the latter on co-ordinating the movement of workers to personally lodge their complaints and assist investigations in small coordinated groups rather than en-masse. NGOs are also useful to the government because they provide welfare services to migrant workers assisting government investigations. These workers have nowhere to live and no source of sustenance but have to remain in Singapore as prosecution witnesses. The cost of providing for such government witnesses can be borne by NGOs rather than the state.

Given the constraints that NGOs face – most notably the prohibitions of the Societies Act under which they are registered – case-work is extremely important in that it allows them to leverage on loopholes in laws and enforcement, the public image of the government as adhering to the rule-of-law and international pressure. At the same time, the participation of NGOs within state-sponsored sites is also expedient to some of the objectives of the Ministry. The “critical mass” of case-work is important here because advocacy – in the form of contesting deportability and occupational immobility among other calls for increasing legal protection for migrant workers – cannot be launched when migrant workers do not approach these NGOs for assistance as NGOs would not have a substantive basis for advocacy.
Spill-out from the 2008 GFC

The greater the spill-out from workplace disputes, the greater the impact of NGO advocacy. While the impact of migrant labour advocacy has always been limited – NGO staff and volunteers often bemoan the fact that the Ministry often “ignores” their recommendations and demands – it is particularly telling that, as far as migrant non-domestic blue-collar workers are concerned, the greatest impact advocacy had on the migrant labour regime was during and right after the GFC of 2008/09, which saw about 1,500 Bangladeshi construction and shipyard workers flee their companies amid gross under-deployment, unpaid wages and employer intimidation. While earlier NGO (mostly closed-door) advocacy on issues such as kickbacks and occupational immobility (i.e. the existing COE administrative framework) had previous gone unheeded by the Ministry, the GFC saw the latter change its positions on both these issues.

Publicly and behind closed doors, NGOs made several clear demands/calls to the Ministry during this period: (i) to allow workers a change of employer; (ii) to force employers to compensate workers for the remaining validity of their contracts in addition to full wages for the time they were in Singapore; (iii) should employers have insufficient resources, for compensation to come from the levies paid for each individual worker; (iv) to increase the penalties for failure to pay wages on time; (v) to be more stringent in approving work permit applications; (vi) to work with sending countries to monitor recruitment channels and; (vii) to conduct “exit interviews” at immigration points to curb forceful repatriation (The Online Citizen, 15-01-2009).

While the Ministry did not formally amend the COE system, it made a one-off concession to allow many of the affected workers to find new employers while remaining in Singapore. The Ministry also immediately made it compulsory for employers to pay their migrant workers a basic day’s wages even when they are not deployed to work. This new rule was applied to the cases being investigated and expedited during the GFC and was soon formalised as part of the work permit regulations under the EFMA. Most significantly, the Ministry changed its stance towards kickbacks – from claiming to NGOs that it was a “private issue” to explicitly
prohibiting it and subsequently criminalising it under EFMA\textsuperscript{74}. While these “concessions” were still somewhat limited, it remains one of the more significant gains made by migrant worker NGOs. In the absence of mass citizen support for the cause of migrant workers, it is significant that the NGO advocacy campaign during the GFC was driven or fuelled by the unprecedented number of workers who had fled their companies to seek redress.

\textit{Limitations beyond NGO strategies and civil society space}

Given that case-work derived from instances of flight provides the impetus for NGO contestation and that some impact has been made, the limitations of advocacy cannot be explained in terms of NGO strategies and civil space alone. It also needs to be considered that other outcomes of production politics, which do not culminate in workers seeking NGO assistance, limit the thrust and scope of NGO advocacy. As far as Bangladeshi migrant workers are concerned, the durability of the politics of obedience becomes a significant factor given that workplace grievances are indeed widespread. The limitations of NGO advocacy can therefore stem from the fact that dynamics of control within the workplace – not all of them coercive – prevent grievances from being politicised into contentious struggles which would, in turn, allow NGOs with opportunities to lobby for labour reform.

This is a particularly salient consideration when we take some of the relatively weaker demands that NGOs have made over the years. For instance, NGOs (specifically HOME) had been lobbying the Ministry to look into worker allegations of kickbacks and to liberalise their COE framework for construction, shipyard and conservancy workers at least two years before the GFC spill-out. These calls were often plainly ignored by the Ministry since the cases encountered mostly involved complaints made by individual workers and were often few and far between. In fact, prior to 2008, NGOs often informed workers that they would not be able to assist them on allegations of kickbacks because the Ministry refused to formally recognise it as an employment matter (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013). It is also worth considering that while many workers I interviewed were explicitly aggrieved over having to pay kickbacks (especially for work-permit renewals), their grievances did not end in overt

\textsuperscript{74} By prohibiting kickbacks under work permit regulations, infringements would draw an administrative fine. Kickbacks have been subsequently criminalised under the main body of the EFMA where violations would draw prosecution.
disputes. They were in a position to reconsolidate their migration projects and could continue to use tactical obedience to protect their immediate interests. Hence, they exercised passive non-renewal rather than resistance. The turnaround on these issues made by the Ministry in the wake of the GFC was largely due to the magnitude of underdeployed workers who were in no position to practice obedience-based accommodation because their migration projects could not be reconsolidated. What were previously weak calls became strong ones and forced the Ministry to respond.

Likewise, it is worth considering that NGOs have called for the repeal of particular work permit conditions that they feel are discriminatory towards migrant rights such as those that prohibit a work permit holder from marrying in Singapore or engaging in “immoral and undesirable activities” and “breaking up Singaporean families” (Solidarity for Migrant Workers, 2011). There has been little real contestation on the part of workers over these rules largely because they rarely, if ever, manifest themselves within their concrete everyday life experiences or place stress on their migration projects. There is little information on whether migrant workers have actually had their employment terminated and repatriated on these grounds. In fact, some workers I interviewed interpreted these “immoral and undesirable activities” as gambling, drinking and engaging paid sexual services. They felt that Bangladeshi workers in Singapore should not engage in these activities because they ran against the grain of their social and religious mores (Various Interviews with workers). In short, there is little political impetus for NGOs to make such claims even though they constitute an open and evident form of discrimination.

Struggles with collective mobilisation

Flight as an outcome of production politics is even more significant in driving migrant labour advocacy when we consider that NGOs have struggled to collectively mobilise migrant workers to push for labour reform. While stringent and repressive laws restrict the freedom of workers to form unions and explicitly prohibit NGOs from engaging in political activities, collective action on the part of migrant workers – organised/assisted by or independent of NGOs – has nonetheless occurred in recent years. In mid-2012, HOME’s then executive director, Jolovan Wham, organised a large group of Chinese female factory workers at a local Panasonic factory by drawing up a petition against their employers demanding an increase in wages and a reduction in working hours
In February 2012, over a hundred Bangladeshi construction workers staged a sit-in by a construction site in the eastern suburb of Tampines to protest unpaid wages (The Online Citizen, 06-02-2012; TWC2, 09-02-2012). While these workers acted independently, one or two individual workers did solicit some advice from NGO staff via the latter’s help-lines (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013). In November of the same year, a group of 171 Chinese bus drivers, employed by the state-owned SMRT transport corporation, went on strike over pay-parity and accommodation issues (The Straits Times, 26-11-2012; ABC, 03-12-2012). While NGOs were not involved in any way with the strike, they did offer the drivers facing prosecution assistance with legal counsel, shelter and food (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2012). Unfortunately, these episodes of direct migrant worker collective action have so far produced few tangible gains for migrant workers or independent political space in Singapore – the striking bus drivers were deported and the purported “ringleaders” prosecuted and jailed (CNN, 26-02-2013); the construction workers sit-in at Tampines was contained by the police, without overt force, and swiftly resolved by Ministry officials (TWC2, 09-02-2012); and the Panasonic workers’ petition led to no improvements in working conditions and earned the NGOs a stern reprimand from the Ministry (publichouse.sg, 03-10-2012). On a more encouraging note, the state-owned SMRT Corporation announced an increase in wages for all bus drivers and a revision to the company’s pay system in March 2013, a few weeks after the last striking drivers had been sentenced (inSing.com, 08-03-2013).

The case of the Bangladeshi construction workers sit-in at Tampines is particularly interesting. About 200 workers from two (presumably linked) companies working on the same project had acute grievances over three months of unpaid wages, extremely long working hours, wage deductions for food and utilities and kickbacks for work permit renewals. From the few scant news reports (largely due to the police cordoning-off the strike area) it was not clear if these grievances had descended into an open dispute prior to the strike. Nonetheless, collective action was taken by workers who staged a sit-in near the worksite on the 6th of February 2012. Some of these workers would have had advice on their legal rights and avenues for redress according to employment laws. These workers could have walked-off the job, taken to flight and lodged formal claims at the Ministry with NGO assistance. Like the massive “spill-out” from the GFC, such an occurrence would have given NGOs more impetus to formally
contest issues such as kickbacks and the lack of employment protection for migrant workers within different sites of advocacy. Instead, the Tampines workers chose to sit-in which resulted in the containment of collective action and left NGOs with little opportunity to get more involved in the matter.

Unlike the usually individual forms of defiance and open resistance illustrated in Chapter Six, the sit-in had a relatively stronger impact. It forced the Ministry to act on it and eventually proved useful as it allowed the Ministry to force the employers to pay the unpaid wages within a short period of time. Additionally, the Ministry publicly claimed that it would further investigate the companies for any infringements of employment laws (presumably over the kickbacks). Most importantly, of course, the workers’ jobs were safe, for the time being at least. However, in spite of, or precisely because of, the strong impact of collective worker mobilisation, they are almost always contained (as in the Tampines sit-in) or repressed (as in the other two instances) by the state. The authoritarian state-responses that collective actions bring about essentially close up channels of contestation. Individualised or collective instances of flight, on the other hand, tend to open up channels of advocacy. Within a context in which collective migrant worker action is severely restricted and repressed, the failed workplace resistance of workers and their subsequent flight ironically remains the primary impetus behind formal challenges to the migrant labour regime.

Migrant labour advocacy groups act within an authoritarian political space where there is no freedom of association and there are huge restrictions on political freedoms and freedom of expression. As a result, it becomes very difficult, albeit not impossible, to collectively mobilise migrant workers or to mobilise mass citizen support for migrant workers. Within such a context, it becomes difficult for NGOs to advocate for migrant worker rights. NGOs, thus, need reasons or opportunities to legitimise their advocacy work, especially towards the state. It is case-work procured from their direct services – which are, in turn, products of contentious outcomes of production politics – that allows them to engage with both state and non-state stakeholders to exert pressure on the state to reform migrant labour laws. In this sense, particular outcomes of workplace struggles between workers and contractors – such as flight, rather than the perpetuation of obedience-based politics – provide the driving force behind migrant labour advocacy in Singapore. The variant and contingent outcomes emanating from these struggles,
therefore, demonstrate both the potential for and the limits to contention which the contentious politics literature does not examine.

**Refining the Regime by Administrative Means**

While NGOs attempt to engage in autonomous lobbying within state-sponsored sites, the Ministry attempts to incorporate autonomous contention into the legal-administrative mechanisms of the state. Substantively, this is done by widening the scope of their complaints mechanisms by creating additional offences for employer practices like kickbacks and legally requiring employers to pay their workers basic wages when un-deployed. This means that more workplace grievances and disputes can actually be dealt with within state-sponsored sites of participation. In other words, workplace disputes over under-deployment and kickbacks can now be resolved administratively rather than through political contention.

For the same reason, the PAP-controlled NTUC set up the Migrant Workers Centre in order to address the welfare issues of migrant workers locked in disputes without independent advocacy. In 2012, the MWC was quick to step in to help resolve worksite disputes which had become public without publicly advocating for legal reform. The MWC’s approach is most evident from the manner in which it intervened in another construction worker sit-in in the northern suburb of Yishun in December 2012. The MWC stepped in to assist Ministry officials in resolving the pay-dispute between four Chinese workers, 20 Indian workers and their employer (My Paper, 19-12-2012). Rather than publicly criticising the Ministry for previously ignoring the complaints of some of these workers – a fact later pointed out by HOME’s Jolovan Wham in an open letter to Minister of State Tan Chuan Jin (TWC2, 08-01-2013) – MWC chairman, and PAP member of Parliament, Yeo Guat Kwang praised the Ministry’s “swift response” to the dispute and reminded employers to adhere to Ministry regulations (Channel NewsAsia, 19-12-2012). In the wake of labour unrest among the migrant labour force, the MWC is working with the Ministry to “educate” migrant workers on how to “settle any employment dispute amicably” (My Paper, 19-12-2012).

In line with what Rodan and Jayasuria (2007) have argued, the measures taken to legally require “no-work pay” and to prohibit kickbacks, as well as setting up the MWC, encourage workplace disputes to be resolved administratively at an individual (individual worker or workers from an individual firm) level rather than through
collective mobilisation. In effect, these “concessions” represent a “technocratic management and resolution of political conflict” (ibid: 796) originating from tensions within the labour process. They complement, rather than free up, existing “tight controls on political expression” (ibid) which “militate against” (ibid) attempts to collectively mobilise migrant workers or mass citizen support for their causes.

The refining of the migrant labour regime through administrative incorporation is simultaneously accompanied by the suppression and containment of any form of collective action by migrant workers. The SMRT bus driver’s strike was harshly suppressed. 29 of the 171 striking workers were forcefully deported by the Ministry themselves while five others were sentenced to six to seven weeks in jail for purportedly instigating the strike (CNN, 26-02-2013). The rest of the workers were handed a stern written warning. While SMRT had publicly refused to raise the wages of the Chinese drivers in December 2012, the company announced a revision of its non-executive pay scale in March 2013 (inSing.com, 08-03-2013). The Panasonic workers’ petition ended with no gains for the workers after the Ministry determined that none of the working conditions that they were aggrieved over contravened existing labour laws. The NGOs involved in organising the petition with the workers were privately censured by the Ministry (publichouse.sg, 03-10-2012). As a result HOME executive director Jolovan Wham had to be relieved of his position and given a job brief that did not involve direct engagement with MOM (Interview with Jolovan Wham, 03-04-2013).

The construction workers’ strike in Tampines was swiftly contained by the police and resolved by MOM. Within hours of the strike occurring, the police came down and cordoned-off the area where the workers were staging a sit in. Shortly after, MOM officials arrived and the dispute was swiftly resolved after these officials reached an agreement with the employers for all wages to be paid up within a specified period of time (TWC2, 09-02-2012).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that the shape of NGO contention in Singapore cannot solely be understood by describing civil society space or the political opportunity structure. At the same time, nor can we assume that workplace grievances among workers transform unproblematically into organised forms of contention. Here, I have pointed towards the significance of struggles within the labour process, or the
politics of production, which are shown to be the driving force behind NGO calls to reform the migrant labour regime in Singapore.

I have shown that by calling for legal reform in both state-sponsored and autonomous sites of participation, NGO advocacy presents a challenge to the existing migrant labour regime. This is in large part because advocacy seeks to contest the occupational mobility and deportability of migrant workers, which are significant constituents of migrant labour powerlessness. Migrant labour powerlessness, in turn, is a crucial aspect of this regime. While the regime has not been fundamentally transformed, some small but significant changes have occurred in terms of migrant labour legislation and the Ministry’s position towards particular labour issues facing migrant workers.

I have argued that the political impetus behind NGO contention comes from particular contentious outcomes of workplace struggles such as flight, rather than the perpetuation of the politics of obedience. Instances of flight are translated into a “critical mass” of case-work through the nexus of NGO direct services. Case-work represents the primary basis of migrant labour advocacy in various political sites, without which advocacy cannot be conducted. Within the context of an illiberal political environment where NGOs struggle to collectively mobilise workers or mass citizen support, contentious outcomes of production politics allow NGOs to legitimise their advocacy work and engage with both state and non-state stakeholders to exert pressure on the state to reform migrant labour laws. Conversely, it also needs to be considered that the limitations of advocacy can stem from the fact that while worker grievances are widespread, dynamics of control within the workplace prevent them from turning into contentious struggles.

Finally, small concessions made by the Ministry in reforming aspects of migrant labour laws also need to be seen as a “technocratic management and resolution of political conflict” (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2007: 796), where the scope of complaints mechanisms are broadened so that political conflict in the labour process can be channelled into these sites of de-politicised resolution. This process is accompanied by the suppression and containment of any form of migrant worker collective action. While NGO advocacy, driven by particular contentious outcomes of production politics, continues to carve out spaces of contention, the state attempts to administratively incorporate and suppress it. In this chapter, I have shown that these processes are, in fact, highly
contingent on the nature of outcomes produced by production politics in the labour process.
Conclusion

Since 2005, NGO activism, calling for greater legal protection for contract migrant workers, has constituted the most concerted challenge to the migrant labour regime in Singapore. Despite a severely restricted civil society space, migrant labour advocacy has delivered small but significant reforms to migrant labour laws and the way in which the PAP-state handles various migrant labour issues. For example, from 2009, the Manpower Ministry has criminalised employer kickbacks for hiring and shifted its position on recruitment practices and forceful repatriation. These shifts reflect both the gains and limitations of advocacy which cannot be explained simply in terms of the “civil society space” argument of the contentious politics stream within the literature on migrant labour politics (e.g. Lyons, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009; Piper, 2005, 2006; Ford and Piper, 2007; Yee and Lyons, 2009). In contrast, I have established that the nature, impact and limitations of these challenges need to be explained also in terms of the nature of labour process dynamics – or production politics – involving migrant workers and their immediate employers. Specifically, I argue that the extent to which the migrant labour regime is contested is contingent on the form and outcomes of these production politics. This argument is constructed, in the particular case of Bangladeshi construction workers, using a conceptual framework that explains how a certain form of production politics takes shape and is played out; as well as the extent to which differing outcomes provide the political impetus for the migrant labour regime to be contested.

The production politics among Bangladeshi migrant construction workers and their employers tend to take the form of a politics of obedience. This form of production politics is characterised by enduring worker dissatisfaction over the nature of the effort-reward bargain. In spite of this, workers appear reluctant to confront their employers and tactically accommodate employer control in order to informally renegotiate the effort-reward bargain. Ethnographic and political economy scholarship tend to emphasise the political powerlessness of migrant workers and their migration projects as constraining worker agitation (Sassen-Koob, 1981; Sassen, 1988; Mitchell, 1996; Pinches, 2001; de Genova, 2005; Arnold and Hewison, 2006; Constable, 2007; Binford, 2009). While they offer important insights, these studies do not consider the workplace as a labour process where employers try to get work out of workers. But this is a significant consideration given the distinction between the use of direct coercion to get
work done and the use of coercion to suppress worker agitation. It is therefore important to consider how “constraining” socio-political factors like powerlessness and migration projects engender a range of worker responses to labour control. By examining worker obedience as a tactical response to specific material circumstances within and beyond the labour process, I account for the prevalence of obedience politics in terms of three intersecting factors – the political economy of Singapore’s migrant worker policies; the nature of workers’ migration projects; and the manner in which production is organised within Singapore’s construction industry.

Certain migrant worker policies, such as the levy system, were introduced as a pricing mechanism to push the economy towards more capital-intensive growth while reducing its dependence on cheap migrant workers. This, however, created cost pressures for construction contractors who were unable to innovate their production techniques. These contractors initially responded by levy-dodging, which was clamped down on by authorities. In 1991, the EFMA was enacted which effectively transferred the costs of maintaining and repatriating migrant workers onto individual employers. Rising levy, dormitory and utilities rates further increased the cost pressures on contractors. Within the context of migrant labour powerlessness and the suppressed state of organised labour in Singapore, this created a tendency among contractors to use wage pressure strategies to transfer these costs onto their migrant workforce in order to protect profitability.

Bangladeshi migrant workers, on the other hand, are constrained by the nature of their migration projects. The high level of debt incurred in securing a job means that these workers are dependent on extended tenure and a strong earning capacity to succeed in migration. Tenure stability and earning capacity, however, are immediately undermined by their deportable status in Singapore and employer wage pressure strategies. At the same time, these migrants face shame, ostracisation and economic strain in their home communities should they not succeed in accumulating sufficient wealth from migration.

Thus, the politics of obedience is characterised by the tensions between the demands of these migration projects and workers’ powerlessness in openly contesting employer wage pressures. In fact, it is the precise manner in which political powerlessness and migration projects are situated within the dynamics of control in the construction labour process – i.e. how employers set their workers to work – that explains the prevalence of
obedience-politics among Bangladeshi migrant workers. Within Singapore’s construction industry, the dispersed geography of production prevents a large concentration of workers at a given point of production for prolonged periods of time, and this inhibits workers from consolidating grievances and developing a collective response. Yet, this dispersion, together with relatively autonomous supervisory control arrangements, allows workers to regulate their work efforts and negotiate the terms of their work. Furthermore, employers tend to combine strategies of veiled intimidation with individualised concessions at work. Within the context of structural coercion, spaces for worker agitation are, hence, closed off while opportunities for informal negotiations are opened up. Workers use these opportunities to tactically utilise obedience in order to avoid confrontation with work superiors whilst renegotiating the effort-reward bargain. Workers conduct informal negotiations by openly proving their competence and obedience to work whilst soliciting wage increments or preferential deployments which would either improve rewards or lessen their work efforts. It is particularly telling that while employers have the ability to direct work through coercive intimidation, they do not ordinarily do so. This is because the tactical use of obedience by workers circumvents employer coercion while providing employers with what they need – actual work being done. It is also significant that many Bangladeshi migrant workers have the opportunity to reconsolidate their migration projects through compounded loans. This means that worker discontent over wage pressures can be resolved in a less contentious manner or dissipated outside the labour process.

The coherence of the politics of obedience cannot be taken for granted. While the social and spatial dynamics of production inadvertently produce outlets for worker accommodation, their grievances over how wage pressure strategies affect the effort-reward bargain remain. Tactical obedience allows workers to moderate their efforts but usually fails to improve the rewards handed out by employers. As a result, workers often take to a range of everyday resistances, such as work pacing, to mitigate an unsatisfactory effort-reward bargain without overt confrontation. As levy and dormitory rates continue to rise, this tense status-quo is further tested as employers introduce more wage pressures to protect profits.

In the case study of production politics at EW Construction (Chapter Five), I demonstrated how a crisis of obedience was brought about when the company enforced new salary deductions for rain-stoppages. It is of note that the eventual restoration of
obedience, in this case, was not the result of managerial strategies or even direct coercion. Rather, it was the interventions of supervisors in the labour process – securing small concessions from management, collaborating with workers in work pacing, and re-ordering the production sequence – which, once again, allowed workers to practice tactical obedience through work pacing. These interventions were only possible because, within the organisation of production, supervisors are given a large degree of autonomy by management to organise and direct work activities. Such an arrangement generates a relatively autonomous set of class interests for supervisors that are separate from those of workers and management. This not only made it possible for supervisors to intervene, it also meant that it was in their immediate interests to intervene in the particular way that they did. Crucially, these interventions effectively depoliticised worker grievances without resolving them. While grievances over wage rates and working conditions endured, they did not transform into confrontational struggles in the workplace.

In explaining how grievances transform into overtly contentious struggles and instances of flight (Chapter Six), I identify particular forms of workplaces disputes – over wage pressures and harsh work regimes; over under-deployment; over the management of work injuries – as key to this understanding. For all their grievances, Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore ordinarily attempt to avoid disputes and often succeed in doing so through tactical obedience. However, certain situations – work accidents; shortage of jobs; the intensification of work regimes or wage pressures – may arise. In these circumstances, which are neither routine nor exceptional, workers are unable to deploy obedience to protect their migration projects. Tactical obedience does little or nothing at all to address unbearable work and pay regimes, the absence of medical attention after work accidents, the firm’s shortage of jobs, or unpaid wages. Furthermore, the powerlessness of workers and the absence of collective-bargaining platforms mean that they do not have access to, or have trouble accessing, formal means to resolve these issues. As such, affected workers feel compelled to contest these disputes, whether in the form of quiet pleas or confrontational demands.

The slightest hint of disobedience inevitably unleashes the coercive capacities of employers. They respond to worker demands with threats, violence and forceful repatriation. These responses pose an immediate threat to workers’ migration projects and physical well-being. Due to the weak intrinsic class strength of migrant workers in
Singapore, agitation and overt acts of insubordination in the workplace are almost always destined to fail. In fear, despair and desperation, workers take to flight by deserting the workplace or evading forceful repatriation in order to seek outside help for their predicament. Flight therefore represents an effective withdrawal of labour-power beyond the coercive control of the employer and an overt contestation of an employer’s sovereignty to unilaterally repatriate undesired workers. Many of these workers end up connecting with local migrant worker NGOs, where their grievances are translated into assistance cases and statutory claims. This move effectively forces employers to resolve work disputes within the formal-legal framework of the state rather than through intimidation or force. Furthermore, flight represents attempts by powerless workers to search for, and mobilise, political resources beyond the workplace in order to address their predicaments.

In linking the form and outcomes of production politics to NGO contestation of the migrant labour regime (Chapter Seven), it was revealed that outcomes culminating in flight, rather than the continued coherence of obedience-based politics, provide the political impetus for these challenges. These migrant worker NGOs conduct their advocacy activities within both state-sponsored and autonomous sites of political participation. Within the former, NGOs engage in para-bureaucratic interventions into the formal labour complaints mechanism to directly lobby Manpower Ministry officials for reform. Within the latter, they engage in public lobbying through action research reports and the reporting of human and labour rights violations to global stakeholders such as the UN Council of Human Rights and the US Department of State. Despite the limited impact of advocacy on the migrant labour regime, the Ministry has made significant turnarounds on a few issues it had previously refused to address. No-work-pay (for under-deployed workers) was instituted in 2011, while kickbacks were prohibited in 2008 and then criminalised in 2012. While repatriation companies were not outlawed, they were warned by the Ministry on their treatment of migrant workers. Despite not signing multilateral agreements with various labour-sending countries, the Ministry became keen to better understand recruitment practices there.

The issues raised by NGOs during para-bureaucratic interventions and stakeholder reporting do not come out of nowhere, nor do they simply emerge from the widespread grievances of workers. These issues are derived from the breakdown of obedience politics in the workplace which compel workers to flee the workplace and seek outside
help when confrontation leads to the unleashing of employer coercion. It is particularly telling that many of the reforms were devised and implemented following the 2008/09 GFC. The economic crisis created a situation of labour under-deployment in many construction and shipbuilding firms that were short on contracts but had surplus migrant workers under their charge. This, in turn, contributed to the breakdown of tactical accommodation within the workplace, which subsequently led to an increased number of workers fleeing the workplace to seek NGO assistance. The documentation of these cases of flight constitutes the “critical mass” of case-work that drives advocacy forward. The “civil society space” argument is therefore insufficient – it is this critical mass of case-work, culled from cases of worker flight, that allows these NGOs to actively carve out spaces and opportunities for advocacy. Within the context of an illiberal political environment where NGOs struggle to collectively mobilise workers or garner mass citizen support, contentious outcomes of production politics allow NGOs to legitimise their calls for reform.

The primary contribution of this thesis is that, unlike the existing literature on migrant labour politics, it emphasises the significance of production politics in understanding challenges to migrant labour regimes. The form and outcomes of these production politics hold significant implications for the nature and extent of organised political contention within an authoritarian state such as Singapore. The existing nature of civil-society space or opportunity structures alone is insufficient in accounting for this as it does not elucidate the root causes of contention. In this thesis, the ways in which production politics play out are identified as the “social foundations” or root-causes of contestation which underlie the nature and extent of civil-society space and the political opportunity structure (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2012; Rodan, 2013). A contentious politics approach in the Singapore case only presents what is apparent – that NGO challenges to the migrant labour regime are limited because of the limited nature of civil-society space. An approach focusing on the dynamics of struggle in the labour process, such as the one presented here, illuminates the extent to which spaces and opportunities for contention can be created and closed-off.

Despite spaces for contention being opened up by the “critical mass” of worker flight cases documented by NGOs, Singapore’s migrant labour regime has remained relatively unscathed. That migrant worker NGOs are weak as a result of authoritarian restrictions on freedoms of expression and association is apparent but insufficient to explain this. It
has already been established that these weak NGOs have succeeded in prompting some reforms in spite of not being able to politically mobilise workers or garner mass citizen support. The explanation for this lies in two points – the dynamic nature of authoritarian rule in Singapore and the containment of labour tensions within the labour process.

Rodan and Jayasuria (2007) and Rodan (2008, 2013) have stressed that the PAP-state’s authoritarian rule in Singapore is durable and dynamic. The regime had gone beyond “crude repression” in dealing with political opposition to refined, creative and sophisticated means of anticipating, accommodating and blocking emergent pressures for reform (Rodan and Jayasuria, 2007: 797; Rodan, 2008: 248, 2013: 30-31). In making these arguments, these authors focus on the use of administrative and societal incorporation through the state in the co-option of dissent. They cite examples of programs created by the PAP-state, such as the Feedback Unit and REACH, in accomplishing this. However, the case of migrant labour regime contention proves to be more challenging for the PAP-state due to the largely autonomous nature of migrant labour advocacy. Para-bureaucratic lobbying, unlike the Feedback Unit or REACH, is not organised or sponsored by the state. Furthermore, such activities are not something the labour complaints mechanisms cater for or even formally allow.

Rather than restricting or blocking NGO access to the complaints mechanisms or suppressing autonomous public lobbying, the PAP-state responds with a range of calibrated measures. Even the use of coercion to counter recent episodes of migrant worker collective action was varied based on the contentiousness of these actions – the bus drivers’ strike was harshly put down; the Panasonic workers’ action resulted in warnings for activists involved; while the Tampines strike was contained as the Ministry acted to resolve the dispute. Rather than suppressing para-bureaucratic interventions into the complaints mechanisms, the Ministry opened up additional channels of engagement – i.e. closed-door meetings – where they attempted to harness NGO groundwork for their own problem-solving. The least noticeable, but certainly crucial, measures involved small reforms to migrant labour laws. The criminalisation of kickbacks and the institution of no-work-pay for un-deployed workers reflect how the existing complaints mechanisms were broadened in scope. This effectively meant that more workplace grievances and disputes can be handled administratively rather than through political contention. Finally, the PAP-controlled NTUC set up the Migrant
Workers Centre in a bid to help resolve workplace disputes without independent advocacy.

Equally important to these state measures of co-option is the fact that tensions between migrant workers and their employers are often contained within the labour process. While the political impetus for NGO advocacy is derived from outcomes of flight, the continued coherence of the politics of obedience effectively limits the nature of contestation over the migrant labour regime. However, the way that this containment comes about was not purely an outcome of state design. The state’s migrant worker policies are coercive – restricting migrant workers’ access to citizenship benefits and making them occupationally immobile and deportable. All these ensure that migrant workers could be “used and discarded” through administrative procedures, hence suppressing their ability to agitate for better working conditions. At the same time, such forms of structural coercion, together with the demands of workers’ own migration projects, serve to engender the particular form of conflict in the labour process. While coercive migrant labour laws allow employers much leeway to use direct coercion at work, the dispersed and autonomous nature of labour control in production allows workers to circumvent coercion through tactical obedience. It is perhaps ironic that the relative “backwardness” in the organisation of construction work – which made wage pressures necessary – proves to be an inadvertent outlet for the mitigation of labour tensions over the effort-reward bargain. It is of note that the political impetus for advocacy originates from the moments when these migrant workers are unable to utilise obedience to defend their immediate interests. The tense and precarious nature of the politics of obedience observed in this study, however, indicates the potential for further challenges to the migrant labour regime.

The approach and findings of the thesis have implications for how we understand migrant workers in Singapore of different nationalities and in other economic sectors, particularly domestic household migrant workers. These female migrant workers work under quite different constraints from their male counterparts in construction for example. Coming from countries such as Indonesia, Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and Burma, their migration projects differ significantly, particularly in terms of gender and the recruitment process. While they are subject to similar forms of powerlessness in Singapore, their employment relations are not governed by existing labour regulations but rather, by certain provisions under the EFMA. Most significantly, however, the
nature of domestic work indicates a different kind of production process and hence production politics. NGO advocacy on behalf of these workers in Singapore predates that for male migrant workers and has been well-covered in the literature (Lyons, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009; Piper, 2005, 2006; Yee and Lyons, 2009). After decades of civil society groups campaigning for a mandatory weekly day-off for migrant domestic workers, the Manpower Ministry finally legislated for it in 2012 (BBC, 06-03-2012). In view of such developments, questions need to be asked about the nature and outcomes of production politics in domestic work that contributed to the struggle for and the eventual legislation of the mandatory day-off. Existing studies merely focus on the role of NGOs and the state but do not pay sufficient attention to the role of domestic migrant worker agency in driving this process forward.

Similar questions can be asked with regard to male and female shipyard, conservancy, manufacturing and service sector workers of various nationalities in Singapore. These workers enter the country on similar legal conditions as those in this study but can have different migration projects. Gender is again a crucial dimension in this. Furthermore, the organisation of production in these industries may vary to differing extents from those highlighted in this study. Within the manufacturing and service sectors, in particular, these differences may be considerable. These factors, likewise, have significant implications for the ways in which the production politics of these workers play out and the extent to which NGOs are able to advocate on their behalf.

Beyond Singapore, this thesis advances a conceptual framework for analysing the articulation between production politics and modes of political participation. Challenges to contract migrant labour regimes in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and East Asia have taken different forms and yielded significantly different outcomes (Ford and Piper, 2007; Constable, 2009; Hsia, 2009; Elias, 2010b; Buckley, 2013). From the anti-globalisation demonstrations by migrant worker coalitions in Hong Kong (Hsia, 2009), to the wildcat strikes of construction workers over wage demands in Dubai (Buckley, 2013), various episodes of migrant worker contestation can be framed as being underpinned by particular forms of production politics that drives claim-making forward, in addition to historically contingent modes of political participation that allow for different forms of contestation. The form of production politics potentially shapes the manner in which specific grievances or political claims of migrant workers come about; while the historically-specific modes of political participation indicate the
political and ideological resources that migrant workers have to address these grievances or forward their claims. The approach used here, thus, allows for questions over contestations of various migrant labour regimes to be reframed in this manner.

While the nature of production politics and modes of participation available to migrant workers may vary according to time and place, “production politics” and “modes of political participation” are universal concepts that can be applied to different historical and geographical contexts to illuminate various developments in migrant labour struggles. This thesis offers a framework that captures the articulation, or interplay, between these concepts. This articulation is a particularly crucial consideration as it shapes the nature of political opportunities and civil society space available to migrant workers and activists. The framework presented here can, therefore, be used elsewhere to understand the extent to which advocacy groups are able to represent migrant workers’ concerns and to push forward different reform agendas. This dynamic draws out further ramifications for state authorities seeking to maintain the integrity of the overall regime. In short, the manner in which production politics are constituted and played out within the context of historically available modes of participation will have significant implications for how migrant labour regimes are contested and how states handle these contestations.
Appendix: Migrant Worker Pay-slips

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
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<td>-</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Oct 2010 Thu</td>
<td>1630</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>15 Oct 2010 Fri</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Oct 2010 Sat</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Oct 2010 Sun</td>
<td>OFF</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Oct 2010 Mon</td>
<td>MC</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>1630</td>
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<td>24 Oct 2010 Sun</td>
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<tr>
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Total: 100.00 167.50
Figure 2

SALARY SLIP

Name of Employee: ____________________________ Date: 24/9/06

Salary For 1st/2nd Half of ____________________________

From _______________ to _______________

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<th>(Daily Rate)</th>
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</table>

Total

Less: $40.00  (Food allowance)

Less: $100.00  (Absent on 30/3/06)

Amount credited to your POSBank Account: $220.00
Figure 3

![Payment Voucher Image]

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Salary of September include overtime</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tax saving deposit</td>
<td>£150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: £641

Cash/Cheque: Cash

Approved by: [Redacted]

Received by: [Redacted]
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