Labour Justice and Political Responsibility: An Ethics-Centred Approach to Temporary Low-Paid Labour Migration 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.

Stephanie Chok Juin Mei
Abstract

The policy discourse surrounding low-paid labour migration is driven by economic utility approaches. In this thesis, I adopt an ethics-centred, justice-oriented approach in assessing temporary low-paid labour migration, a politically divisive issue in many countries, including Singapore. I argue that a labour justice approach demands shared political responsibility to ensure that managed labour migration programs are ethically robust, rather than merely economically beneficial.

This thesis situates itself as value-full, politically motivated research, and adopts activist ethnography as its primary methodology. Structural inequalities are explicitly acknowledged and academic objectives are aligned with broader imperatives for social change. Extensive fieldwork was carried out in Singapore over several periods between 2006 and 2010. The central case study involves migrant construction workers from China embroiled in labour disputes with their company, Hai Xing Construction. The workers complained of withheld wages, unfair deductions, excessive work hours and underpayment in terms of overtime and rest day pay. Hai Xing Construction, a subcontractor, employed hundreds of construction workers who were sent to the building sites of two high-profile casino developments backed by large gaming companies and supported by the Singapore government.

Sustained empirical work contributed to an exploratory framework for assessing migrant workers’ precariousness – what I term their precarity package. This framework considers the various dimensions of labour insecurity experienced by low-paid migrant workers as well as two key interdependent features of low-paid labour migration: deportability and dependency. Collectively, these mutually reinforcing dimensions and features constitute what can be conceived of as a precarity package – a confluence of factors and relations that contribute to a heightened state of precariousness, and leave migrant workers vulnerable to abuse at all stages of their employment experience. I argue that atomistic interventions
that address isolated aspects of this complex, collective experience have limited effectiveness and often result in further unintended negative consequences.

This thesis argues against conceptions of justice obligations that are narrowly legalistic, deceptively apolitical and unrealistically spatially-bound. A labour justice framework recognizes that attempts to achieve workplace democracy cannot be divorced from the concurrent need for a broader conception of worker participation. It is not merely policy reform, but a radical reorganization of decision-making processes and the democratization of institutions and regulatory regimes at the national, regional and international scale that is required. Otherwise, genuine empowerment will remain implausible and ad-hoc gains from policy modifications will operate as concessions that appear progressive while entrenching the status-quo.
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<tr>
<td>ACL</td>
<td>Assistant Commissioner for Labour</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACMI</td>
<td>Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People</td>
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<td>AFL-CIO</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>AREU</td>
<td>Attractions, Resorts and Entertainment Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>BATU</td>
<td>Building Construction and Timber Industries Employee’s Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCA</td>
<td>Building and Construction Authority</td>
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<td>CLS</td>
<td>Core Labour Standards</td>
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<td>CSR</td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
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<td>EA</td>
<td>Employment Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFMA</td>
<td>Employment of Foreign Manpower Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>EP</td>
<td>Employment Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FWO</td>
<td>Fair Work Ombudsman</td>
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<tr>
<td>GLCs</td>
<td>Government-Linked Companies</td>
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<tr>
<td>GONGO</td>
<td>Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>HKCTU</td>
<td>Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions</td>
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<tr>
<td>HOME</td>
<td>Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICA</td>
<td>Immigration and Checkpoints Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>IR</td>
<td>Integrated Resort</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISA</td>
<td>Internal Security Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRD</td>
<td>Labour Relations Department</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBS</td>
<td>Marina Bay Sands</td>
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<td>MFA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>MNCs</td>
<td>Multinational Corporations</td>
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<td>MOM</td>
<td>Ministry of Manpower</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
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<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
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<td>MRT</td>
<td>Mass Rapid Transit</td>
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<td>MWC</td>
<td>Migrant Workers’ Centre</td>
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<td>NTI</td>
<td>National Tripartite Initiative on CSR</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NTUC</td>
<td>National Trades Union Congress</td>
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<td>NTWU</td>
<td>National Transport Workers’ Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWC</td>
<td>National Wages Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>OJT</td>
<td>On-the-Job Training</td>
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<td>PA</td>
<td>Passports Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>People’s Action Party</td>
</tr>
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<td>PME</td>
<td>Professionals, Managers and Executives</td>
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<tr>
<td>PMET</td>
<td>Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians</td>
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<tr>
<td>RWS</td>
<td>Resorts World Sentosa</td>
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<td>SCM</td>
<td>Social Connection Model</td>
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<td>SNEF</td>
<td>Singapore National Employers Federation</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAFEP</td>
<td>Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td>TFWPs</td>
<td>Temporary Foreign Worker Programs</td>
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<td>TJS</td>
<td>Temporary Job Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<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>UNGC</td>
<td>UN Global Compact</td>
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<td>WICA</td>
<td>Work Injury Compensation Act</td>
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<td>WP</td>
<td>Work Permit</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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Dedication

To Yong and Shen, who fought for justice, despite the odds.

And to Dad, who was looking forward to completion.
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