

**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.

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## 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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## **List of Abbreviations**

ACL	Assistant Commissioner for Labour
ACMI	Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AREU	Attractions, Resorts and Entertainment Union
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BATU	Building Construction and Timber Industries Employee's Union
BCA	Building and Construction Authority
CLS	Core Labour Standards
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EA	Employment Act
EFMA	Employment of Foreign Manpower Act
EP	Employment Pass
FWO	Fair Work Ombudsman
GLCs	Government-Linked Companies
GONGO	Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization
HKCTU	Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions
HOME	Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics
ICA	Immigration and Checkpoints Authority
ILO	International Labour Organization
IR	Integrated Resort
ISA	Internal Security Act
LRD	Labour Relations Department
MBS	Marina Bay Sands
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MNCs	Multinational Corporations
MOM	Ministry of Manpower
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Member of Parliament
MRT	Mass Rapid Transit
MWC	Migrant Workers' Centre
NTI	National Tripartite Initiative on CSR
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
NTWU	National Transport Workers' Union
NWC	National Wages Council
OJT	On-the-Job Training
PA	Passports Act
PAP	People's Action Party
PME	Professionals, Managers and Executives
PMET	Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technicians
RWS	Resorts World Sentosa
SCM	Social Connection Model
SNEF	Singapore National Employers' Federation
TAFEP	Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices
TFWPs	Temporary Foreign Worker Programs
TJS	Temporary Job Scheme
TWC2	Transient Workers Count Too
UN	United Nations
UNGC	UN Global Compact
WICA	Work Injury Compensation Act

WP	Work Permit
WTO	World Trade Organization



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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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