

S'poreans moved to ease plight of Indian workers

TODAY article triggers various groups into action

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IN A TODAY column published last Tuesday, social activist Constance Singam wrote about the unlikely predicament 200 Indian workers recently found themselves in: Going hungry in a land of plenty.

Left high and dry without their wages by troubled contractor Wan Soon Construction, there were days when these workers had to go without food.

Seeing this happening in "a country where there is food everywhere", Ms Singam had asked: "When something goes wrong, who sets it right?"

Some 50 Singaporeans responded.

Within two days, The Working Committee 2 (TWC 2), a two-year-old group of individuals seeking to improve the welfare of foreign workers here, collected \$10,000.

The donors included many foreign workers who commiserated with their counter-

parts and gifts from members of the public.

The Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple on Ceylon Road has also offered to ferry the workers twice a month from their Kaki Bukit dormitory to the temple for lunch.

On Monday, Dr Tan Chong Kee, a TWC 2 well-wisher, came to the temple to distribute \$3,000 worth of donations among the 200 affected workers who were eating a lunch of rice, *dhal*, vegetables, *papadam* and sweet dessert. Each worker received a gift of \$15 from Dr Tan.

Aware president Braema Mathi, also president of the pro-tem committee for TWC 2, said they would assess the workers' needs and release more funds when necessary. The balance would go into setting up an emergency relief fund for foreign workers, she said.

Ms Singam's column has also spurred five Singaporeans to form a help group, *We Care*, for foreign workers. One is acting as

a translator in their negotiations with Wan Soon at the Ministry of Manpower.

But a long-term solution is missing, said Dr Tan. He suggested putting aside part of the foreign worker levy the Government collects from employers as surety to make sure that the workers are paid.

Pointing out that some employers deduct the levy from the workers' salaries, he reasoned: "At what point can the government say, it's not responsible? At some point, if you're the authority that collects levies, that implies responsibilities to ensure that the whole system is functioning smoothly."

Agreeing, Ms Singam said: "The foreign workers come under the Employment Act, so why is it that they are not paid for six months? How did that go unnoticed?"



The Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple on Ceylon Road has offered to provide lunch twice a month for the 200 affected Indian workers.

Meanwhile, the workers, who put up a peaceful demonstration outside the Indian High Commission last month remain hopeful that they would be paid eventually.

Each of them is owed between \$4,000 and \$7,000 by Wan Soon.

Said Mr V Bhaskaran, one of the affected workers: "Wan Soon won't go bankrupt. They just want to avoid paying. Every year, construction firms say they're going bankrupt and send workers back without pay. How can foreign workers come here?"

The only redeeming fact, it seems, is the generosity Singaporeans have shown.

"Hopefully, that will save the image and reputation of our nation in this whole sad affair," said Ms Singam.

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12 youth and their 2,500 hearts

THE good people at TODAY's Business Desk may not be too pleased with the following story.

You see, yesterday, quite a few people who got their copy of TODAY from Raffles Place MRT, never read page 18 of the Business section. They had donated it to a bunch of altruistic young people collecting page 17 on the flip side — where SingTel's Touching Lives Fund advertisement was printed.

The ads feature a cutout and instructions to fold a heart-shaped origami. For each heart dropped in the post-box by the end of today, SingTel will donate \$1.25 to the fund.

The 12 young people from the Singapore chapter of Generation Acts Club International, an

independent youth club, had chanced upon the ads and wanted to do their part. They have been at Raffles Place every day since Monday and have surpassed their target of 2,500 hearts.

"Some people gave a whole stack collected from colleagues. Others gave us bags full of folded hearts," said team leader David Chan, 25.

The Fold-A-Heart drive ends today, but to make a \$5 donation to the fund, call 1900 112 8811 or *SEND by pressing *8811 on your mobile phone.

SingTel will match each donation with \$6.25. For more details on the fund, visit www.singtel.com/touchinglives. — Raymond Andrew

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