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# THE STRAITS TIMES

SINCE 1845

MONDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2012

## 'Limits' to attracting S'poreans to key services

Bosses keen but higher pay demands would drive up operating costs: DPM

By POON CHIAN HUI

SINGAPOREANS remain high on the wish lists of operators and providers of public transport and other essential services.

But while the Government would like to encourage as many Singaporeans as possible to join these sectors, there will always be a "limit", said Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean.

This is because many Singaporeans have high aspirations and tend to go for higher-value jobs, he said yesterday.

They would expect to be paid more if operators want to attract them to the sector, and this would push up operating costs.

"We have to understand if we want to encourage more Singaporeans to come into essential services, there will be an impact on the operating cost," Mr Teo told reporters on the sidelines of a community visit in Pasir Ris.

The question of whether Singapore is over-reliant on foreign workers for its essential services, and who should bear the higher cost if the sector employs more locals, was thrust into the spotlight after 171 SMRT bus drivers from China went on strike on Nov 26.

Weighing in on the issue for the first time, Mr Teo said: "With regard to essential services, we would like to encourage as many Singaporeans as possible to join."

"That is one of the reasons why the bus services, for example, want to increase the pay, im-

prove the conditions of bus drivers, so that more Singaporeans will want to come into the industry to drive buses."

But doing so would have an impact on the overall cost of running a system, he pointed out.

"Whether it's bus service, whether it's conservancy and maintenance, whether it's the water department, whatever - that has an impact on cost. Because manpower is a major component of cost."

His comments came after Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew suggested last Thursday that bus fares might go up in future to help improve the wages of bus drivers.

Mr Lui's suggestion drew strong reactions from commuters, who were adamant that the increase in operation costs should be borne by the two bus operators, SMRT and SBS Transit.

Yesterday, the Workers' Party and the Singapore Democratic Party - in separate statements - also rejected a possible fare hike. The opposition parties shared the opinion that the public transport operators are very profitable and that commuters should not be made to pay higher fares.

At the event yesterday, Mr Teo also reiterated that it is important that employees turn to the proper channels to air their grievances. Joining the union is one way, as it helps foreign workers understand the legal situation here and how they can resolve differences with their employers, he suggested.

He said: "Every country has laws about how essential services have to be maintained. And in that regard, Singapore is no different from any other country."

"And that particular aspect has to be enforced strictly. Otherwise, you will have disruption in society, which affects everybody, every commuter."

Who wants to be a bus driver? TOP OF THE NEWS A6



SPORT B18

### VAN PERSIE'S WINNER SETTLES MANCHESTER THRILLER

Robin van Persie (right) scoring an injury-time goal that gave Manchester United a 3-2 win over Manchester City yesterday. The result marked the end of City's near two-year unbeaten home run in the Premier League and put them six

points behind their cross-town rivals.

The match was marred by crowd trouble at the end after United defender Rio Ferdinand was left with a bloodied face after being struck by an object thrown from the crowd. PHOTO: REUTERS

## Only 15, but schoolboy is an Internet consultant



Working out of his bedroom, Greenridge Secondary School student Neo Soon Keat makes US\$2,000 (S\$2,440) a month, hosting the websites of about 300 small companies and individuals. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

By IRENE THAM  
 TECHNOLOGY CORRESPONDENT

GIVE Neo Soon Keat, 15, a computer and a Web connection, and you have an Internet whiz-kid.

The Greenridge Secondary School student is already making US\$2,000 (S\$2,440) a month, hosting the websites of about 300 small companies and individuals.

He is so successful at what he describes as his "first real digital adventure" that MyRepublic, a Singapore Internet service provider, has chosen to work with him.

In June, the company began partially sponsoring his fibre broadband access and business costs in exchange for his consultancy services.

When Neo Keat started offering Web hosting services in June last year, all he wanted to do was help the people who lost their websites and domain names when their service provider, Host-Rail, shut down its business.

Using free Web hosting services like SiteFrost, he helped the

affected users - whom he met on online forums - re-create their websites for free.

At first, he recovered some business costs by selling advertisements on the websites he hosted. Later, he began to charge for Web hosting, leading to his present monthly income.

"This is enough to give me a small profit," said the only child, who runs the business out of his bedroom in a four-room Choa Chu Kang flat.

Soon Keat wants to pursue a computer networks and security course at a polytechnic.

He envisions the day when his security knowledge will give his customers peace of mind.

The teen wants to be his own boss, but he is not dreaming of making his first million dollars yet, preferring instead to start small.

He hopes that famous bloggers like Wendy Cheng (better known as Xiaxue) and Mr Brown will let him host their blogs.

"The rest will come later," he said. [itham@sph.com.sg](mailto:itham@sph.com.sg)

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