

# A breakthrough year in advancing workers' rights in Singapore



It's work in progress, but new labour legislation in 2024 to balance worker protections with economic realities marks a significant step.

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In a world where labour rights have increasingly come under threat, Singapore made significant strides in 2024 on worker protection through a variety of legislative measures.

Reports from the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the World Justice Project (WJP) highlight a mixed global state of labour rights.

The 2024 WJP Rule of Law Index points to improvements in areas such as combating labour discrimination in 52 per cent of countries. But it underscores that even in countries showing improvement, scores remain low. Meanwhile, the ITUC Global Rights Index signals a troubling deterioration in workers' rights over the past decade, marked by weakened collective bargaining, growing income inequality, and crackdowns on unions.

Against this challenging global backdrop, Singapore's legislative efforts over the past 12 months stand out. These included the Platform Workers Act, the Workplace Fairness Legislation, and the Tripartite Guidelines on Flexible Work Arrangement (FWA) Requests. The measures reflect a commitment to balancing worker protections with economic realities.

However, as we begin 2025, further progress on the journey will require navigating the complex interplay between workers' needs and business interests.

### KEY LEGISLATIVE MILESTONES

The Platform Workers Act, which was enacted in 2024, directly addresses the unique needs of approximately 70,000 such workers in Singapore. They comprise about 3 per cent of the resident labour force.

By creating a framework that recognises their hybrid status – as neither employees of platforms nor self-employed – the Act provides much-needed protections to mitigate their vulnerabilities as part of the digital and gig economy.

Singapore's success in passing this legislation is particularly notable given the challenges other countries face. Despite

vocal advocacy for gig worker rights, many countries have struggled to implement effective reforms.

Most significant among the provisions in the Act is access to social security benefits in the form of CPF contributions, which ensure housing and retirement savings.

Platform workers will also receive reasonable compensation for injuries sustained during their work, and platforms will be obliged to rigorously assess and improve their processes to ensure a safer working environment.

Another key provision is a legal framework for representation. This will allow workers to better engage in collective bargaining, in areas such as how earnings are computed.

On a broader level, the tabling of the Workplace Fairness Legislation in Parliament in November was also significant.

Even though there is a strong business case for inclusive hiring, short-term thinking can lead employers to eschew hiring workers requiring accommodation for their existing familial or personal obligations, such as time off to attend to a childbirth, or the provision of meals in line with dietary requirements.

The Workplace Fairness Legislation thus seeks to continue the protections that have already been in place for some time now through the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices. However, it augments the guidelines to protect workers and job seekers from the unfair or discriminatory actions of a small number of errant employers.

This is done by designating and protecting various characteristics – nationality, age, sex, marital status, pregnancy status, caregiving responsibilities, race, language, religion, disability, and mental health conditions.

Employers are expected to ensure that workplace practices do not discriminate against workers on the basis of these characteristics. If not, they risk various penalties, including court action.

The Workplace Fairness Legislation also ensures that businesses provide safe methods for employees to raise grievances, and better ways to seek recourse and redress. This is juxtaposed against the development of an adversarial system where workers seek to sue employers for every possible breach – as is the case in many other developed countries.

The introduction of the Tripartite Guidelines on FWA Requests further marks a significant cultural shift in how work-life balance is perceived.

In a society where excessive

work commitments can compromise well-being, this guideline empowers employees to request flexible arrangements without fear of reprisal. Formalising the right to request flexible work ensures employers consider such requests seriously, fostering more adaptable workplace norms.

Of course, it remains to be seen how widely these requests will be granted in practice and whether additional legislative measures will be needed to enforce due process.

If rejection rates are high or grievances emerge about unfair refusals, it may prompt further reviews to ensure the intended cultural shift is realised.

By prioritising mental health and adaptability, this measure reflects lessons learnt from the pandemic, which underscored the importance of balancing personal and professional obligations.

### CAUTION AND DELIBERATION TO NAVIGATE LABOUR REFORM

Cautionary tales abound of countries introducing ambitious worker rights policies without securing employer buy-in; often leading to resistance, weak enforcement, or eventual rollbacks.

For example, Australia's "right to disconnect" laws, rushed through its Parliament in 2024, faced criticism for inadequate consultation with businesses and productivity advisers. This lack of engagement has led to concerns about the feasibility of enforcement and the potential unintended consequences on productivity and workplace dynamics.

Singapore's incremental and consultative approach mitigates these risks, fostering a collaborative environment where reforms are both impactful and enduring.

The phased approach to the implementation of the Workplace Fairness Legislation – starting with larger companies – is an example of the recognition of

balancing workers' rights with business concerns.

All the workplace legislations enacted in 2024 reflect the city state's unique tripartite approach – a collaboration between the Government, employers and unions – ensuring reforms address worker needs without alienating businesses.

This model has allowed Singapore to make headway, where many other countries have struggled.

While this approach slows implementation – as seen with the length of time needed to bring about paternity leave expansions, the Platform Workers Act, and the Workplace Fairness Legislation – it ensures policies are well considered and broadly supported.

But there are areas where things have not moved forward.

The transportation of migrant workers on lorries in Singapore offers a pertinent example of the complexities involved in advancing labour protections.

Despite calls to enhance safety standards, such as mandating proper seating and protective measures, these proposals have faced significant pushback from small and medium-sized enterprises citing cost concerns and operational challenges.

These debates are often set against emotionally charged narratives of worker safety, heightened by tragic incidents of severe injuries or fatalities from unsafe transportation practices.

The stark contrast highlights the challenges of squaring worker safety with business feasibility.

Singapore's deliberate and consultative framework seeks to address such contentious issues methodically, ensuring that reforms are both impactful and implementable.

But to further enhance this balanced approach, it is essential to deepen engagement with smaller enterprises, ensuring that they, too, can implement and benefit from these reforms.

Offering transitional support

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and incentives for compliance could smooth the path for more widespread adoption, ensuring that labour protections are truly inclusive.

The Platform Workers Act exemplifies this staged compliance approach; it introduces CPF contributions for platform workers incrementally over five years. Workers born on or after Jan 1, 1995, are automatically enrolled, while older workers can opt in.

This approach is further tempered by the Platform Workers CPF Transition Support scheme, which offsets increases in CPF contributions through direct cash payouts to lower-income platform workers.

These payouts gradually decrease over four years. Together, the moves ensure that workers and businesses have time to adjust to the new norms while maintaining immediate financial stability, and balancing the need for worker protections with the realities of business adaptability, ensuring long-term sustainability.

### THE PATH AHEAD

While Singapore has made commendable progress in advancing workers' rights, challenges remain. The efforts thus far are part of the Government's broader vision to not only protect workers but also ensure a sustainable and inclusive workforce for the future.

The phased implementation of the Workplace Fairness Legislation and the progressive roll-out of platform worker protections reflect the delicate balance needed to align competing priorities.

While these delays may be frustrating for some, they underscore the importance of ensuring reforms are both practical and sustainable. These measures are particularly salient to safeguard Singaporean workers given the ageing workforce, increasing caregiving responsibilities, dismal birth rate, and economic shifts favouring greater reliance on gig work where workers often bear significant responsibilities themselves.

Without the bold legislative measures enacted in 2024, it would be much harder to tackle these interconnected demographic and economic issues. Singapore has set a compelling benchmark for other nations.

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