

# Our cleaners deserve our smiles and more

By ZAINUDIN NORDIN  
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EVERY visitor to Singapore always marvels at how clean and green our city is. Much as I like to hear the compliment, it sometimes seems to me hollow. Singapore is clean not because of our individual behaviour. It is clean because of the armies of cleaners who tirelessly pick up after us.

Without cleaners, our void decks would be strewn with junk mail and used tissues. Our streets would be lined with plastic bags, drink containers, Styrofoam boxes and the odd slipper or two. Our public parks and beaches would be covered with the remains of our picnics... I could go on and on and on.

My point is that cleaners are an important part of our reputation as a nation. They hold unglamorous jobs, but they help us live a high-quality life.

Through my work at the National Trades Union Congress, I have had the opportunity to speak with many cleaners. Most of them are above 40 years old and have little formal education. Yet they are like you and me. They have dreams, aspirations and hope for a better life for their families.

But the odds are stacked against them. Ministry of Manpower statistics show that the pay of cleaners, now at \$975 a month, has suffered a negative growth of 0.9 per cent per annum for the last 10 years. That means that while most of us have earned more year by year, cleaners have actually earned less. The reason is clear: cheap sourcing.

As cleaning contracts are mostly outsourced, service buyers tend to award them to the lowest bidder, regardless of whether the contractor has the capability to do a good job or not. The thinking seems to be: How difficult can a cleaning job be? So just award the contract to the lowest bidder.

But almost 80 per cent of the costs in a cleaning contract is spent on manpower. So in order to quote low, contractors have to press down on workers' pay. As a result, cleaners earn less with each succeeding contract for doing exactly the same job, at the same place of work, for

the same number of hours.

Another reason cleaners earn so little is what I call the "Newcomer Advantage Syndrome". Under the Employment Act, workers' annual leave goes up by one day for each year they have worked, starting from seven days per year to 14 days. Responsible employers tend to pay workers based on their performance and seniority. This means that good employers would have workers who have more leave and earn a slightly higher pay than other workers. But companies that are "newcomers" to the business have an advantage since they need to give their workers only seven days of leave and pay them the basic starting salary.

This insistence on cheap sourcing seems to have spread to the public service as well. Newspapers quoted a recent report by the Auditor-General that the Ministry of Education (MOE) is paying more than necessary for school cleaning contracts. The report suggested that MOE should accept "below market norm" contracts of only 5-9 per cent below market price.

What that really means is that if cleaning companies do not mechanise their tools, they will have to pay their cleaners lower in order to quote 5-9 per cent below market norm. This is of particular concern because cleaners in school cleaning contracts are among the lowest-paid in the industry.

I fully understand the need to be prudent in spending public funds. Nevertheless, I believe procurement and tender evaluation practices need to be revised. Price should not be the only or dominant criterion of selection. We must include quality of work and performance in the selection criteria.

Most of us treasure the quality of our clean living environment. We should place a value on that quality.

Consider how other countries treat their cleaners. As a recent BBC News report on Japan's cleaning culture noted, it is Japanese women, not foreigners, who clean the toilets in hotels. This is so not only because there are few foreign-born workers in Japan, but also because the "Japanese people do not see cleaning as a demeaning or shameful job. School children are trained

from a young age to sweep their classrooms and scour the playground for litter". In Japan, cleaners are seen as professionals.

NTUC has been promoting the Best Sourcing Initiative (BSI) to create a win-win-win situation for service buyers, service providers and workers. A good example is the partnership between Singapore General Hospital (SGH) and ISS Facility Service. SGH works together with ISS to raise cleaning standards in the hospital. Workers are sent for upgrading, there is mechanisation and ways are thought up to expand the role of cleaners. In SGH, they double as porters.

What we have done for the security guard industry might be a model. The Ministry of Home Affairs established the Security Industry Regulatory Department (SIRD) in September 2004. SIRD enhanced the standards of the security industry by, among other things, introducing a new basic training and testing system. Working together with NTUC, Ministry of Manpower, Workforce Development Agency and the security union, SIRD successfully elevated the image and professionalism of security guards. This resulted in an increase in the value of security contracts, which in turn led to higher pay for security guards.

Can we apply the same type of thinking to the cleaning industry? Dare we aspire to do what the Japanese have done for their cleaners?

I hope the next time you walk past a cleaner, you will smile at him or her. Cleaners are your first line of defence against disease. They are the foot soldiers who help us maintain a clean, green and safe living environment.

The writer is the Mayor of Central Singapore District and MP for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC. He is also director of NTUC's Unit for Contract and Casual Workers (UCCW) and Care & Share.

