

# Industrial conflict



Which theories or theories of industrial conflict, if any, can best explain the state of industrial conflict in Singapore? Justify your answer. This essay is based on the assumption that Singapore's industrial relations tend to be pluralistic in nature. The pluralistic approach to employment relations as defined by Bray, Waring and Cooper (2011) is that the employment relationship contains a potential to conflict. Hence, the question is the extent of industrial conflict in Singapore and which theories can support this.

Industrial conflict is defined by Kornhauser et al (1954) as the ' total range of behaviours and attitudes that express opposition and divergent orientations between industrial owners and managers, on the one hand, and working people and their organisations on the other hand. ' There are many schools of thought explaining industrial conflict, one of which is the John Dunlop's model. The extended John Dunlop model is the tripartite gum model which is practiced in Singapore as seen in fig 1. 1 (fig 1. 1 Appendix) Three main actors in an industrial relation system— government, employers and employees..

These three actors are able to carry out effective negotiations under the interaction process of the tripartism system to bring about solutions to industrial conflict present in Singapore. The basic function of the tripartism system in Singapore is to employ peaceful employment relations as well as to improve the quality of life for workers through economic development for the nation. Additionally, Singapore has effective manpower policies coupled with effective legislation, rules and regulations that explains the lack of industrial conflict in Singapore.

Another assumption to consider for this essay is that industrial conflict is to be broadly classified into covert or overt conflict. Overt conflict is more collective, organised and confrontational which takes place in the form of protests and strikes whilst covert conflict is individual, spontaneous and unorganised (Deery, Plowman, Walsh and Brown, 2001) and takes place in the more subtle form of absenteeism, accidents, turnovers and even sabotage (Tan, 2004). In Singapore, there is no overt conflict due to the absence of strikes. The existence of covert conflict in Singapore and the theories that support it is debatable.

In my opinion, covert conflict does not exist widely because of paternalistic government approaches that result in strong union pressures to resolve conflicts before it escalates. It is also attributable to legislation, conciliation, mediation, arbitration and the setting up of the industrial court that explains the lack of industrial conflict in Singapore. However, it still does exist in the form of low productivity levels which I will explain below. The minimal industrial conflict in Singapore is due to institutionalisation of legislation and trade unions in Singapore.

This is backed up by the theory defined by Wright Mills (1948) which explains that the institutionalisation of trade unions over time results in the decline in industrial conflict. As explained previously the evolving roles of trade unions in Singapore had reached a “ symbiotic” relationship with the government. Additionally, the institutionalisation of legislation, rules and regulations are in place to ensure that employers, employees and unions work together to secure the peace of the employment relationship. Examples of legislations include the Employment Act and Trade Union Act.

Recently, Chua Yini (2012) reported a wage dispute case that was resolved almost immediately when 200 foreign workers staged a protest in Tampines as they claimed that they did not received their salaries. Under the Ministry of Manpower Act, disputes between workers and their employers were settled amicably without allowing such conflicts to become worse (Appendix pg1). Similarly, another theory by Clegg (1976) suggests that the absence of industrial conflict is due to the comprehensiveness of dispute procedures under collective bargaining.

There are clear rules, procedures and legislation that is carefully spelled out in the Ministry of Manpower website that is easily accessible by public. It includes information of the various Acts related to employment. Thus, workers are aware of their rights as rules and regulations are carefully spelled out into by Singapore, Ministry of Manpower 2012. This includes the Employment Act, Industrial Relations Act, Trade Union Act seen in the appendix (Appendix pg2). This comprehensiveness and accessibility of dispute procedures makes sure that workers understand their rights which lead to efficiency in times when workplace conflict does arise.

Yet, it is also because of such strict rules and regulations in Singapore that lead to the presence of covert conflict in Singapore. The theory that relates to the extent of covert conflict in Singapore is the Organisational Justice Theory. One antecedent to perceptions of organizational justice is the extent to which employees feel that they are involved in decision-making or other organizational procedures. Higher levels of justice are perceived when employees feel that they have input in processes than when employees do

not perceive that they have the opportunity to participate (Greenberg & Folger, 1983; Bies & Shapiro, 1988).

The culture in Singapore is one whereby respect to authority is of great importance, as such employees would not dare to voice out their opinions so, there is minimal involvement in the decision making process. To make things worse, Singapore has created an environment that denies collective bargaining, this is evident in the numerous rules and legislations enforced in Singapore's workplace system that completely discourages overt conflict altogether. This would result in employees venting their frustrations by practicing covert behaviour.

Employees can resort to quitting their jobs. Currently, turnover rates in Singapore are not high due to the near full employment rates in Singapore and Singapore is expected to experience recession soon. Furthermore, income households in Singapore coincides with expenditure levels in households as seen from surveys done by the Ministry of Manpower (Appendix pg 4) Because of this, instead of employees quitting their jobs and practicing covert behaviour they express it in the form of low productivity.

This is proved by the recent Budget 2012 speech by Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam who said that Singapore far fall behind Switzerland and United states in productivity levels (Appendix pg5). Therefore, strict legislation and authoritative culture in Singapore's workplace stifle employees' needs to voice out their dissatisfaction, opinions and take part in workplace decisions. This results in unfairness as explained

by the organisational justice theory which would lead to employers to engage in covert conflict and this manifests itself in low productivity levels.

Industrialisation in Singapore over the decades lead to minimal industrial conflict. Industrial conflict is linked to the very essence of industrialisation itself. The state of industrial conflict in Singapore can be explained by the Ross and Hartman theory. Ross and Hartman (1960) argued that “ there will be a withering away of strikes as unions become increasingly accommodated within a country’s political and industrial systems”. This is true in Singapore. To understand this, one has to identify the function of trade unions in Singapore which had been through significant changes over the past five decades.

During the colonial period, the Singapore Trade Union Congress (STUC) participated in the struggle for national independence. After this was achieved, STUC was divided into Singapore Association of Trade Unions (SATU) and National Trades Unions Congress (NTUC). Consequently, a symbiotic relationship was achieved between NTUC and People’s Action Party (PAP). Since the 1960s and when industrialisation began, there was a complete disappearance of strikes in Singapore. This is due to the ever changing roles of trade unions in Singapore.

Most significantly, NTUC contributed to the advancement of the economy by cooperating with the government to create a tranquil industrial climate while attaining the common goals of attracting investments and creating more jobs. This is evident by a massive industrialisation programme was launched in 1968 as well as the Industrial Relations (amendment) Act that was passed

in 1968 to promote industrial peace and discipline among the workforce. Thus, with industrialisation, priorities were set to improve the national economic life in Singapore.

As such, the roles of trade unions evolved to get involved in the political and economic environment in Singapore under the tripartism system so as to cooperate to bring about the common mission and values of Singapore. This is in support of the Ross and Hartman's theory (1960) which states that "labour movements are forced to turn away from strikes in favour of broader political objectives". This explained in the total decline in strikes in the history of Singapore as unions cooperated with the government to attain common political goals.

Political involvement in trade unions in Singapore Leads to a lack of industrial conflict At the same time political factors explain the state of industrial conflict in Singapore. Korpi and Shalev (1979) proposes that "high organisational ability on the part of trade unions, plus a high ability to access government leads to a low incidence of strikes." This theory is relevant to Singapore as the Singapore trade union movement has always been related closely to the government.

The NTUC secretary general and a minister sit in the cabinet meeting. Besides that, NTUC officials like Halimah Yacob also held positions in the government. This "symbiotic" relationship ensures that if there is any industrial conflict within the employment relationship in Singapore, the trade union is able to exert its government influence to solve it. Furthermore, Korpi

and Shalev also propagated that for this to work trade unions have to hold office for significant periods of time.

This is evident in the long history of the symbiotic relationship between PAP and NTUC--- former President Ong Teng Cheong who previously started his career in PAP was the secretary general of NTUC and with the backing of PAP became Singapore's first elected president. Therefore, the long- standing stable relationship between PAP and NTUC ensures that NTUC have the backing of PAP to exert its control and negotiations could be held to solve industrial strife effectively which explains the lack of industrial conflict in Singapore.

Importance in quality education and skills upgrading leads to higher workers' esteem needs Another theory by Kerr and Siegal (1954) that best describes the state of industrial conflict in Singapore explains that workers who are not from urban communities experience more discontent because of poor working conditions and often lower wages. Besides this, these workers do not have the skills required for other job opportunities or simply there are no other job options for them to survive on. As such, industrial conflict within these communities are rampant compared to Singapore.

Singapore being an urbanised society provides premium infrastructure, working conditions and an excellent education system to ensure the employability of workers. Under the Manpower 21 report and budget 2010 (Appendix Pg 6) importance is placed on the lifelong learning and lifelong employability of its workers. There are various funds and programmes like the Skill Development Fund, Workfare Training Scheme as well as building a



first-rate Continuing Education and Training (CET) system that make sure Singapore's workforce is productive.

Since Singaporeans are equipped with the necessary skills they are employable and are able to take on high value added and well paid jobs. This leads to satisfaction of one's job and increases self esteem of employees. ? Satisfaction in one's job also can be explained by the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory which emphasizes the fact that motivated and higher self esteemed employees would lead to long- term job satisfaction. As seen from appendix (Appendix pg6), the maslow hierarchy of needs theory states that employees after satisfying basic needs would move up the ladder to want to accomplish social needs and then self esteem needs.

This ensures that workers are happy in their jobs as there are a plethora of opportunities to improve one-self constantly. Thus, employees' satisfaction lead to happiness and workers would not resort to covert forms of conflict In conclusion, there are many theories that can best describe the state of industrial conflict in Singapore. These theories inextricably overlap each together politically, socially and economically to describe the lack of industrial conflict in Singapore. Therefore, there is no one theory that best describe this state except for the fact that all theories are relevant to explain the context of Singapore.

Furthermore, the extent of relevance of each theory to Singapore's context is debatable. In hindsight, both NTUC and PAP have depicted the symbiotic relationship as one that has enabled Singapore to create a cooperative system of industrial relationship, establish a durable system of tripartism and

institutionalise a system that insures maker interest and are permanently incorporated into government decisions. Despite the practice of tripartism in Singapore, it is argued in my essay that covert conflict exist.

Therefore, steps have to be taken to increase the quality of work life in singapore

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Chapter 11, 'Industrial conflict' pp. 375-401. Appendix Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Pyramid (Adapted from Conley, C, 2010) Fig 1. 2