

Singapore rally a mirror on Taiwan?

December 2, 2012 by Daniel J. Bauer

The China Post carried a report from Reuters Singapore this week about two groups of “China bus drivers,” 259 in all, who went on strike a few days ago for 24 hour periods in protest of their working conditions (11-29-12 p. 13). One reason this event made headlines is that the strike was flagrantly illegal. Singaporean law calls for a 14 day advance notice for a work stoppage that affects public services.

Another reason the strike attracted attention was because it showed foreigners objecting, and objecting vigorously, to treatment they are receiving in a foreign country. The word “China” here, you see, refers to bus drivers in Singapore today who are imported from China. They are not Singaporean Chinese.

Among the complaints of the China drivers is that they receive less pay than Singaporean and Malaysian bus drivers for doing the same work. Their pay is less not because they are less qualified, they say, but because they are foreign.

If I were in the shoes of the 259 striking drivers, and others like them who serve the public in Singapore, my emotions would also likely to be boiling. I would feel the palpable unfairness that hangs like bad air over this situation. How many Singaporeans would be content to work outside their country and receive less salary and other benefits than their local counterparts? The answer, we can bet, is not too many.

Emotions may run particularly high in scenarios that smack of racism and nationalism. A Singaporean responded to the strike by writing on a local newspaper website “This is Singapore, NOT China. If you cannot follow the law of the land, please go back to your own country and strike.”

The China Post article said that the strikers’ unhappiness “underlines the treatment of lower-skilled foreign workers who are vital to the construction, hospitality, and transport sectors in the wealthy city-state.”

Weighing those words, how can any of us miss the similarity with our very own, beloved Taiwan? I don’t know about the transportation or hospitality industries, but without an iota of effort, I can hear a passel of

stories about unhappy foreign workers in jobs most, if not all of us do not care to accept.

Factory work, construction work, and care for our sick and elderly as live-in aids all come to mind.

Not surprisingly, but with no reference to Taiwan or other niches in Asia, the article also points out that many Singaporeans are unwilling to take on comparatively low-paying jobs such driving big buses in rush hour traffic.

There are all sorts of parallels between this news story and day to day life in Taiwan. We have no shortage of mixed feelings on the part of thousands of our foreign workers about inaccurate cultural stereotypes, ethnic tensions, economic pressures and outright injustice.

Pardon me, please, but I cannot help but think of that thing we call the Golden Rule.

“Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” goes one rendering (Mt. 7, 12). We might prefer a more contemporary wording such as “Treat others the way you want others to treat you.”

Tradition attributes to Confucius, of course, the negative phrasing of the same adage. “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others,” and so on (Analects 15:23).

I can hear my critics say, “Look, that is how the system works! Treating foreign workers more roughly than local workers is simply a fact of life. Your Jesus said the poor will always be with us, remember? Well, pal, I say unto you that foreigners are meant by nature to get the short end of the stick, the thorn on the stem of the rose, and the wet end of the cigar. That’s how it’s supposed to be. And if you want to talk nasty, look at how Americans treated Chinese and other Asian immigrants for 150 years or so up to and including World War II.”

Case closed? Not for me.

Taking advantage of foreigners living in a foreign land may appear to be the very definition of “normal.” If so, I prefer the abnormality of a Confucius or a Jesus. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. This column focuses on the question of how much salary foreign workers should receive. In Singapore, workers from China are receiving less pay for the same work Malaysian and other Singaporeans receive for work as bus drivers. Is it fair to pay foreigners less than local workers?
2. The column compares the plight of FOREIGN workers in Taiwan with LOCAL workers, and especially mentions workers who are maids or aids for the ill and elderly as live-in "helpers". Do you have experience in your families or neighborhoods of foreign live in maids or aids for families?
3. The column mentions both Jesus and Confucius and their teachings of the "Golden Rule." Do you think very often of Confucius's words, "Do not do to others what you do not want others to do to you"? Jesus phrases this positively: "Treat others as you want others to treat you."

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