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Manpower under Tripartism in Singapore

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Organizations and employers are often concerned with the design and implementation of HRM practices to fit the various institutional structures. Our paper examines the motives behind policies for productivity management and the shifting institutional supports to employment in Singapore. In the absence of natural resources, the availability of skilled labour and its level of productivity have been central to the industrialisation of the city-state and commonly viewed as one of the keys to Singapore’s economic success: ‘There can be few other places in the world where the social regulation of the labour market has been so consistently and explicitly a central component of national development strategy as it has been in Singapore’ (Coe and Kelly, 2000: 414).

After outlining the tenets of Singapore’s corporatism, we review the policies that characterize the ‘productivity movement’ from the early 1980s (Ohno and Kitaw 2011) to recent developments following recommendations from the Inter-Agency Productivity Taskforce which proposed a range of initiatives that included ‘Skills Future’ under the Workforce Development Agency led by the Singapore National Employers’ Association (Leggett, Kuah and Gan 2017). While maintaining (labour) productivity growth is identified by Singapore’s tripartite institutions to be a national priority as the country climbs further up the global value chain (Leggett 2013), it is primarily directed at the Singaporean ‘core’ workforce (Kuah, Le Queux and Hassan 2016). The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) was also formed to promote and encourage the wider adoption of fair and progressive employment practices among employers. There is indeed a socio-demographic component underlying the economic imperative. Social pressures are mounting over the dramatic increase in the ratio of migrant workers to Singaporean workers. Tightening the labour market is therefore perceived as a means to persuade employers to extract the best from their human resources, and reduce their dependence on foreign skilled manpower.

The success of the new agenda still need to be assessed over time. The agenda is full of challenges. First, because Singapore aims to become a regional talent hub, authorities want to reassure international investors that they will not be restricted from access to the human resource competencies they need. Despite upskilling, a critical issue is whether or not the Singaporean ‘core’ workforce, and especially its young graduates, are competitive with global talents. Second, in a dual labour market, a challenge is how to manage the only ‘partially incorporated’ migrant workers (Leggett and Le Queux 2014) for social cohesion and industrial order.

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