

New foreign labour cuts since July 1 have put even more pressure on firms. In the third of a five-part series, The Straits Times looks at how companies are coping.

Foreign labour from new places

By AMELIA TAN

THE squeeze on foreign labour is driving companies to look for, well, more foreign labour.

But instead of pounding the same old ground overseas, restaurant and construction bosses are exploring new territories.

Due to a mix of hiring restrictions and dwindling supply, firms in Singapore have found it necessary, and useful, to recruit workers of different nationalities.

In the food and beverage sector, for instance, the trend in recent months has been to go Taiwanese.

Six restaurant groups, including Tung Lok and Jumbo, will each hire a handful of waiters and cooks from the island in the coming months, and are hoping for more.

The reason is a quirk in the ruling. There are no specific caps on Taiwanese workers because they are classified as a North Asian source, along with those from Hong Kong, Macau and South Ko-

rea. So restaurants only have to pay heed to the 40 per cent maximum proportion of foreign workers that is allowed for service firms.

In comparison, the Manpower Ministry limits the proportion of such companies' mainland Chinese work permit holders to only 8 per cent of the firm's strength.

"There isn't an additional quota for the Taiwanese. So there are slightly fewer restrictions," said Mr Eldwin Chua, chief executive of Chinese restaurant chain Paradise Group, which employs six Taiwanese workers.

But restaurants emphasised that a key reason for hiring Taiwanese is to improve service standards, said the Restaurant Association of Singapore.

Its assistant honorary secretary Wei Chan explained that the manpower crunch in restaurants has led to a vicious circle: Service standards have dropped and eateries cannot send workers for training because there are just not enough of them around.



Taiwanese service staff Chen Jhen Jie (left) and Chen Yea Ru work at Jumbo Group's steamboat restaurant Jpot. Restaurateurs say Taiwanese are keen to come here because of bleak job prospects at home. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

"We hope that the workers can learn on the job by watching how the Taiwanese serve with a smile and show this genuine warmth," he said.

Taiwanese are keen to come here because of bleak job prospects at home due to a lacklustre economy, said restaurateurs.

Taiwanese waitress Chen Yea Ru, 18, who is working at Jumbo Group's steamboat restaurant Jpot, said: "I could work in a restaurant in Taipei, but I think I can learn more here because the hospitality sector seems more vibrant with the new hotels and integrated resorts."

Similarly, construction firms

■ In the food and beverage sector, firms have been turning to Taiwan.
■ Construction firms are looking to Sri Lanka and the Philippines for workers.

are venturing to new lands for workers.

They are finding it harder to attract Chinese and Indian nationals who make up the bulk of the nearly 300,000 construction workers here, along with Bangladeshis. The Chinese and Indian workers increasingly prefer to

stay at home where the economies are booming.

Construction bosses hope to make up for the expected shortfall by hiring workers from Sri Lanka and the Philippines. They have started to recruit and train workers from these two countries and expect about 400 workers to arrive every month by October.

The two countries also offer plenty of experienced workers who have returned home from the Middle East after the property boom some five years back.

The Building and Construction Authority (BCA) is helping with the search. It has appointed six Singapore construction compa-

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MORE VIBRANT SECTOR

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nies to run eight test centres in Sri Lanka and the Philippines, where workers will undergo a training course and take a compulsory skills certification test.

Mr Neo Choon Keong, BCA's group director of manpower and strategic policy, said it is wise for Singapore to focus on attracting experienced construction workers in the long run.

"We will need fewer workers if more of them are experienced. They need less training and can start work from day one," he said.

ameltan@sph.com.sg

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