

Outcry over racist rant on Facebook

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What it's all about

IN THE space of less than a day, Ms Amy Cheong, 37, went from a largely anonymous National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) assistant director to one of the biggest newsmakers in town.

On Sunday afternoon, she put up a Facebook post railing over the noise from a Malay wedding being held in a void deck near her home, which was filled with expletives and insults about the community.

The posting went viral, kicking up a storm of angry protests online, and by Monday lunchtime, Ms Cheong was out of a job, seen to the door by her employer's zero-tolerance policy on racially offensive behaviour.

What's the buzz

OVER the week, Ms Cheong's post fuelled constant debate that went well beyond the issue of racism.

At first, it was the sheer thoughtlessness of her words that drew a storm of censure. No fewer than five political leaders, including the Prime Minister, weighed in with comments on Ms Cheong's post, as well as the sacking.

Then came some discussion over whether racial fault lines still existed in Singapore, and how deep they were.

But even before the initial furore died down, however, many started to question the response – both online and offline – that the offending post had drawn. Thousands of netizens had cried foul. Some demanded Ms Cheong's sacking; one man saw fit to file a police report; NTUC felt it was necessary to sack her.

All these reactions became a point of discussion, with some wondering if Singaporeans had overreacted, whether Ms Cheong had been overly punished, and whether companies as a principle should act on employees' behaviour outside work.

And as if there were not enough twists, it was followed by the discovery that Ms Cheong was in fact not a Singaporean, but a permanent resident here, bringing yet another element – the foreigner issue – into the mix.

Why it matters

THE numerous questions being raised are all pertinent as well as timely; indeed, the case of Ms Cheong touches on a number of key issues that

may well feature in the ongoing national conversation.

First, whether Singapore is as multiracial as it believes it is, or whether there are deep, hidden fault lines waiting to divide it, is a perennial question that needs to be addressed as nation-building efforts continue.

Was Ms Cheong impetuous and impatient, or did her words reveal an intolerance of the country's multicultural and multiracial make-up?

While optimists believe the latest case to be an isolated incident, some fear that it has exposed underlying racial hatred that inclusive policies have yet to remove.

Then there's the issue of overreaction. While few would defend Ms Cheong's posting, some are now asking if the reaction had been too drastic.

Were netizens a bit too reactionary? Did she really have to be sacked? Was there really a need for a police report? Are Singaporeans just too intolerant?

These questions come amid discussion on privacy issues over social media and online behaviour, and whether more education is needed on online etiquette.

Finally, there's the issue of human resource principles. Some observers believe Ms Cheong was sacked partly because her actions were especially harmful to an organisation that champions equality and fights workplace discrimination.

But it has also raised questions over whether an employee needs to answer to his boss for his actions and opinions expressed outside work, and whether employers should be held accountable for this same action.

In the age of social media and corporate branding, this is an issue that would probably prove a source of much dilemma for any employer.

What's next

MS CHEONG'S case is not over yet. Following the filing of a police report, the post is still being investigated, with lawyers noting that she could face a fine, and even jail, in the worst-case scenario.

How the probe turns out, what happens to Ms Cheong and how Singaporeans react to these online and offline could provide more glimpses into the psyche of the nation, its multiracial values, and its extent of tolerance.

And with netizens sniffing out other cases of racist posts and comments, Ms Cheong's case is unlikely to be the last.