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SPEECH BY MR OTHMAN HARON EUSOFE,
MINISTER OF STATE FOR MANPOWER
AT THE AUPDRW TRIENNIAL DELEGATES CONFERENCE
ON SATURDAY, 25 SEP 99 AT 10.00 AM AT NTUC CLUB,
SHENTON WAY

Mdm Goh Boon Eng, President AUPDRW

Delegates of AUPDRW

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to join you this morning on this special occasion of the union's 3rd Triennial Delegates Conference. In my discussions with the leaders of the union, I am happy to hear that the union has achieved good progress and has worked hard on programmes and activities for the benefit of the members and their families.

We have seen rapid changes in the workplaces brought about by advances in technology particularly information and communications technology as well as the impact of globalisation. To safeguard the members well-being, it is important for union leaders to follow this development closely, anticipate future trends and be ready to make quick adjustments to meet the challenges.

Our economy is showing positive signs of recovery. We have acted decisively to address the problems in our economy. A key measure to enhance our competitiveness in the short term was our cost cutting package implemented in June last year. This included the 15% wage cut across the workforce, which included the 10% point cut in employer's CPF contribution implemented earlier this year. The union leaders made a great contribution here to help explain to their members why wage restraint measures are necessary to enable the economy to regain its competitiveness. Our ability to act decisively demonstrated the strong trust and confidence of the tripartite partners namely the unions, employers and government. We must continue to strengthen this tripartite partnership as we can expect stiff global competition in the years ahead.

In the longer term we cannot compete on the basis of reduced or lower wages. We have to compete on the basis of the quality of our workforce. This means that the training and upgrading of our workforce on a lifelong basis is crucial. Our economy was under severe restructuring last year particularly the manufacturing sector. Many workers were retrenched. Two thirds came from the manufacturing sector. Notwithstanding that our economy has shown signs of recovery, companies' restructuring will continue as companies implement measures to enhance their business competitiveness. This means that more workers will lose their jobs and the most vulnerable ones are the low skilled workers. At the same time new investments coming in to Singapore will create new jobs in such areas as wafer fabrication and the chemical industries. These new jobs require higher skilled workers. We are now faced with the emergence of structural unemployment. It is important therefore that our workers skills are upgraded as their old jobs are being phased out.

Let me stress that the new investments will need a good supply of workers with the right skills. NTUC has initiated the Skills Development Programme. This initiative can help employers to retrain their employees for higher skilled jobs instead of retrenching them. Today more than 20,000 workers from many companies are committed to training under the SRP. With the unions strongly behind this programme and working with employers, we are pushing for 100,000 retrained workers in 5 years.

The Government will do all it can to help workers to be trained and retrained. The strategic blueprint for our manpower development is Manpower 21. Its aim is to make our workforce a globally competitive one relevant to the needs of a knowledge-based economy. A key strategy under Manpower 21 is life long learning for lifelong employability. The pace at which one's current skills and knowledge become obsolete will heighten. We must be able to respond quickly to learn and reskill ourselves. As the competition moves relentlessly into a knowledge economy, we can no longer depend on a job for life but will have to be trained and retrained on a life-long basis to remain employable.

Government can only do so much. Our workers at all levels the young, the mature, the educated as well as the not so well educated, must be strongly committed to lifelong learning. They must be determined to develop a capability to absorb and apply knowledge and add value to their work. I am confident that the union leadership can help to pass this crucial message to their workers and other members. More importantly the unions can help to build the confidence of their members and other workers to seize opportunities for learning, training and retraining on a continuous basis. There is a need for mindset change for some workers who are not convinced of the need for continuous training and upgrading of skills and knowledge. Some may feel that there is no need to train in the work they are in or are not sure of the kind of training they should undergo. They will need to be counselled

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to go for training and retraining.

At the same time, the employers have to be proactive and invest in the training and development of their workers. They should help create an environment where workers will feel confident and be motivated to upgrade their skills and education earnestly. Such a workforce will make their companies dynamic and always competitive.

Let me now conclude by wishing the AUPDRW Leaders and members every success in your endeavours. Be prepared for changes that are rapidly taking place in our workplaces. You can best promote your families' well-being by taking the initiative to go for training and retraining to the best of your ability. You can seek the help and guidance of your fellow members and union leaders if you face problems to attend training and retraining programme. I am sure that they will do their best to help you. High quality performance and positive work attitudes will help you safeguard your employability. At the same time you can look forward to higher wages and consequently a better quality of life for you and your family. I wish you a fruitful conference. Thank you.

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