

3/11/72

ADDRESS BY C.V. DEVAN MAIR, SECRETARY GENERAL, N.T.U.C. AT THE LAYING OF
THE FOUNDATION STONE FOR THE TEACHERS' CENTRE AT THE TEACHERS' HOUSING ESTATE,

YIO CHU KANG ROAD, ON 19TH OCTOBER, 1971, AT 7.30 P.M.

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Comrade Chairman, Comrade Minister, Fellow Trade Unionists, Ladies
and Gentlemen,

A number of years ago a handful of teachers conceived the idea of a Teachers' Housing Estate, with a Teachers' Centre. They pursued their aspiration through the Singapore Teachers' Union. The N.T.U.C. also played a modest part, and we obtained the sympathetic support of the then Minister for Finance, Mr. Lim Kim San. What we witness today, therefore, is the consequence of an organised effort.

And thereby hangs a lesson for all Singaporeans.

Whatever we want to achieve in Singapore, whether in the economic, social, cultural or educational fields, must depend on organised effort. The cohesion and the coherence of this very small Republic of ours, in the present and even more in the future, cannot be left to chance or individual vagaries.

All the social and educational developments, which are today visibly taking place in Singapore, are the consequence of organised and disciplined effort. Personal and individual development is, of course, important. But this does not and cannot take place in a social vacuum. However remote or aloof we think we can remain from our fellow-men, there is still nonetheless a secret solidarity which binds us with all our fellow citizens in a common fate, which we cannot escape.

Far be it from me to suggest that the individual must submerge himself totally in the social or political process. That would be the totalitarian way, and can only lead to an impoverishment in the quality of the social process and of our lives. But in Singapore there are several people who go to the individualistic extreme. Society exists for them. They do not exist for society. It is all a one way traffic. State agencies, social organisations and trade unions have a one way responsibility for them. But they do not reciprocate. They have no obligations or responsibilities to any form of social organisation and effort. They prefer to stand on the side-lines. If things go well, it means that God is discharging His responsibilities to them. But if things appear to be going badly, then they snipe at everybody but themselves. Mr. Rajaratnam has talked about the Ugly Singaporean. But there is a more unpleasant piece of work than the Ugly Singaporean. It is the Sniping Singaporean.

Although they acknowledge no personal responsibility for the general welfare and progress, they are very conscious of their own rights. The fact that rights without corresponding responsibilities are simply not practical when social achievements are only possible on the basis of organised social effort, is something too profound for their shallow conceptions. The Sniping Singaporean may appear sophisticated and even clever. But

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mentally he is the typical street Arab. I looked up Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms for the right word to describe such gentry. The word is "picayune" which means "hopelessly narrow in outlook or interests, often contemptibly so."

I regret to say that the teaching profession has more than its fair share of Sniping Singaporeans. And it is a sad thing for Singapore that this should be so. The Teachers' Housing Estate and Teachers' Centre have been set up by a minority of teachers who were able to summon the necessary drive and dedication to achieve their aspirations. And what they have achieved is for ALL teachers.

The recent collective agreement negotiated between the Teachers' Unions and the Ministry of Education, confer benefits on all teachers, a large number of whom continue to remain outside the trade union fold, but will nonetheless reap the fruits of other people's labours. Would it not have been better all round if everybody had contributed to the collective achievement? Might the collective achievement itself not have been greater, if all had contributed and thrown their weight behind their unions?

But the Sniping Singaporeans will not recognise the facts of life. They will not recognise that men serve themselves better, by serving their fellow men more. They will not recognise that life becomes more worthwhile, if they can live for something more than themselves; something that exceeds and transcends their petty personal interests.

Unless you retreat into a monastery, and seek your personal salvation while leaving the rest of the world unredeemed and unregenerated, you must learn the simple lesson that nobody is saved unless all are saved. And all development and progress, whether economic, educational or trade union development must, in the very nature of things, be participatory in nature.

You do not want to participate or be involved? Then you have no right to bellyache or complain about anybody. And do not tell us that you are not a member of your union because you do not like the leadership. The trade union laws under which we operate makes stringent provisions for democratic processes. If you think that your union policies and programmes should be changed, then go in and change them. But if you do not feel up to it, then the only decent thing you can do is to shut up.

The pundit pontificating on the sidelines richly deserves a punch on the nose. If you want to pontificate, get into the arena, and take your chances like a man. You may still be punched on the nose, of course, but at least you will have the right to hit back. For you are in the arena yourself. And who knows, your pontification might be accepted one of these days, and you might suddenly find yourself acclaimed as a leader.

Be all that as it may, the S.T.U. has certainly made a new beginning. The Union has taken to the modernisation programme in a big way. Within the last year the Union has acquired an additional thousand members, despite the fact that union subscription rates have gone up. You produce a vigorous journal. And a number of dedicated teachers also serve, with distinction, other branches of the national trade union movement. And all this is as it should be.

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For although I have taken well deserved swipes at the Sniping Singaporeans, the fact remains that sometimes trade unions, by reason of organisational inertia, and petty internal squabbles and dissensions, lay themselves wide open to the snipers. But the S.T.U. has matured well beyond this infantile stage, and developed a sound leadership with a dynamic and intelligent programme for the service of its members.

However, I think it is necessary to develop in Singapore a policy towards those who benefit from the organised labours of others. Non-union employees are a good example of non-contributing beneficiaries. Unions negotiate better conditions of employment, better salaries and bonuses, which are applicable to non-union employees as well. And you must not forget that unions are continuously developing their human resources and their expertise in collective bargaining with the financial contributions of their members.

Further, the research facilities of the N.T.U.C. are also subsidized from public funds, and as a result non-union employees enjoy benefits for the achievement of which they do not contribute anything. There is surely something essentially unfair about this state of affairs.

I do not believe that the answer lies in working towards a closed-shop policy. For it seems to me that a closed shop violates the principle of the free and voluntary association of workers in a trade union. It smacks of totalitarianism, and would breed a number of other social evils besides.

But Dr. Winsemius once suggested to me that the answer to the problem of the non-union employee would be to make it obligatory for all non-union employees to contribute the equivalent of union subscriptions to a special Workers' Development and Welfare Fund. This fund would not be used for the operating expenses of trade unions or of the N.T.U.C., but would be administered jointly by the trade unions and the Government to provide a variety of services to our working population. Creches at work sites, better canteen facilities, adult education and other social and recreational amenities for workers could be provided from such a fund.

This seems to me an idea worth the serious consideration of the Government. The Prime Minister has said, more than once, that Singapore cannot afford to carry passengers. What is true for Singapore as a whole is also true for the trade union movement. We too cannot afford to carry non-fare-paying passengers in the labour bus. Dr. Winsemius's suggestion would be one way of ensuring that the Sniping Singaporean is legally obliged to accept a certain measure of responsibility to his fellow workers as a condition for the enjoyment of benefits secured for him by the efforts of the organised workers. I would commend this proposal for the serious consideration of all concerned.

Finally, may I wish the Singapore Teachers' Union a new beginning, a good continuation and an endless progression.