

SPEECH BY MR. C. V. DEVAN NAIR, SECRETARY GENERAL, N.T.U.C., TO GUESTS AT
THE CERTIFICATE PRESENTATION DINNER OF THE NATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY CENTRE
ON SUNDAY, 12TH MARCH, 1972, AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Guests,

The recipients of certificates today include management personnel and trade union leaders, and it is a tripartite body - the National Productivity Centre - which makes the presentations.

The principle of tripartitism, which is the founding principle of the I.L.O., and which is in ever-increasing measure being accepted by governments, trade unions and employers' organisations throughout the world, is also the generally accepted principle and practice in Singapore.

The tripartite basis of the National Productivity Centre itself will soon be sanctified by statute, when it becomes a full-fledged statutory board.

The social and industrial value of tripartitism is being increasingly recognised in other spheres as well, in the Wages Council and in occupational health and safety organisations. Even in a co-operative enterprise of the N.T.U.C. - DENTICARE - we have Mr. Desmond Neill, President of the Singapore Employers' Federation, as one of our Life Trustees. And who knows, one of these days when the N.T.U.C. becomes a sizeable employer in its own right, we will be able to amuse the whole of Singapore by startling the usually suave and imperturbable Mr. Neill out of his wits, by shooting in an application to join the Employers' Federation.

But frivolity aside, there must be a clear recognition and glad acknowledgment on all sides that the essential basis of Singapore's continued economic growth must be the further and more effective consolidation of the tripartite basis and structure of our industrial relations system. This is what civilised nations all over the world acknowledge. For tripartitism means the development of common commitments by Government, employers and trade unions to socially accepted development goals and criteria.

The alternative to the formulation and development of such common commitments must be, where employers are concerned, a primitive profit motive, unbridled and untempered by any social conscience or responsibility; where trade unions are concerned, a reversal to a fundamentally antagonistic and irreconcilable pattern of industrial relations in which interests ^{forever} conflict but never converge; and where Government is concerned, the loss of that political stability, social consensus and rational planning, without which any kind of development strategy becomes impossible and all of us together will tread the road to a stagnant futility.

None of those present here, Government representatives, trade unionists or employers require to be converted to the principle of tripartitism. Nonetheless, it is necessary to periodically reaffirm, in quite categorical terms, the principle of tripartitism as the fundamental and irreplaceable basis of our system of industrial relations and economic planning, if trade unions or employers are to successfully resist the temptation to slide backwards in their common commitment to a common principle.

We grant that trade unions can sometimes be guilty of such back-sliding. But we in the N.T.U.C. are confident of our capacity to haul back into line errant trade unions who might be inclined to stray. But serious doubts exist as to whether employers' organisations have the same capacity or moral authority to deal with employers who flout the principle of tripartitism.

The N.T.U.C. has in its possession affidavits from several workers in a certain establishment in Singapore, to the effect that attempts have been made by the management to coerce and intimidate them against exercising their lawful right to join a trade union of their choice. The laws of Singapore should have been clear beyond doubt or contradiction to the employer concerned. But nonetheless he acted contrary to the law, the general climate and spirit of the industrial relations system in Singapore, and to sheer good sense.

It is not without significance that at the recent Annual Conference of the N.T.U.C., the one issue which generated really strong feelings among delegates was the issue of the hostility of some employers to the very concept and practice of trade unionism. The conference heard reports of dismissals of workers in a number of establishments in the Republic simply because they initiated moves to form or join a trade union. The law provides against such victimisation, but it is difficult to prove such victimisation against a sufficiently slippery employer.

The N.T.U.C. is in the process of preparing a brief on the matter for submission to the Government. The rights of workers will cease to be rights if, in fact, they turn out to be unenforceable rights.

We are confident of the outcome of our representations. For the Prime Minister is on public record as stating that the Government will not allow workers to be bullied or coerced. But it will be so much better to avoid unpleasantness and for all employers to gladly acknowledge the statutory right of workers in Singapore to organise.

Unlike some other developing countries, trade unions are not regarded as subversive ^{organisations} in Singapore. One of the basic values of our social and political life is the right of the worker to self-respect, which is what our trade unions give him. And trade unionism in Singapore also means the right of organised workers to participate as equal partners in the tasks of development. Foreign investors would do well to recognise at the outset that ours is a participatory democracy, and not a dictatorship, whether benevolent or not so benevolent.

We welcome and co-operate with foreign investors in Singapore, but we must confess that we find some of the concepts on industrial relations which some of them bring along to our Republic, out-moded and primitive by our standards, and therefore quite unwelcome.

We do not want our social and political values to be deformed, diminished and flouted by these contrary dis-values. Nor should we allow

our more civilised conceptions about industrial relations to become clogged and deranged, which is exactly what will happen if we allow employers to flout our industrial laws with impunity.

Finally, on behalf of the N.T.U.C., I would like to congratulate all recipients of certificates today, both management personnel and trade unionists, and to express the hope that the National Productivity Centre will grow in sight and in strength and contribute greatly to the further and more widespread dissemination of the principle and practice of tripartitism in the industrial life of our Republic.