

# PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY MR LIM BOON HENG, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO,  
AT THE 34TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER AND DANCE OF  
THE SINGAPORE MANUAL AND MERCANTILE WORKERS UNION  
AT THE MANDARIN BALLROOM, MANDARIN HOTEL, ORCHARD ROAD  
ON FRIDAY, 17 DECEMBER 1993 AT 8.00 PM**

Last week at the Singapore Industrial and Services Employee's Union (SISEU) Dinner and Dance, I related what some union leaders have told me about workers' perceptions of unions. Workers want to see strong unions, but at the same time do not feel an urgent need to join. At that dinner, I stressed the importance of branch officials in creating rapport between union and members, and strengthening the relationship.

But what about workers in companies which are not unionised? What are their perceptions of unions? To throw some light on what they think about the union or the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC), let me quote from a recent anonymous letter complaining about the poor management practices of a company:

"It is time that a committee be set up to encourage employees of companies with valid reasons to feedback and solve all the hidden work problems and prevent issues like these from happening in the future. Currently when a staff is still with a company, they do not dare to see M.O.L. till they have resigned from the company, for fear of jeopardising the career or victimised." (Unedited)

The writer was suggesting that the NTUC set up a feedback channel to solve workers grievances in companies like his. In other words, he knows there is NTUC, and he is hoping that NTUC can solve his problems, and those of other workers. But he does

not seem to realise that there is a need to form or join a union before the union or NTUC can help him!

He may be representative of a group of workers who do not understand that a union can only represent workers' interests if the workers are union members. How large a group is not known, but from time to time members of the public suggest that the NTUC do this, or that, in order to solve a current problem.

The labour movement therefore needs to explain that it has no right to represent workers unless they join the union. Even then, the union must have the support of a majority of workers in a company before the management is obliged to recognise the union.

Quite often the union is approached by workers to organise their company. The union soon finds out that this is because the workers know that some unpleasant event such as retrenchment is about to take place, or that there are serious grievances. In that situation the workers look around to see how they can protect their interests. They then realise the value of a union, and they come knocking on the doors of the union. Very often, it is already too late.

We should explain to workers that joining a union is like taking up an insurance policy. It is too late to think of buying life insurance when the car you are travelling in is about to crash.

Organising workers into a branch union when there are problems is not the most opportune time. It starts the union off on an adversarial position with the management.

We prefer to start out in partnership or collaboration with the management. Wage bargaining, or grievance resolution is only one part of the union's role. The union has a far bigger role in helping to raise productivity in the company. In other

words, the union wants to play its part in enlarging the cake before talking with management about sharing the cake. Organising the workers in a company is starting a relationship with the employer. We may not have done enough to ensure a friendly beginning.

Managements of non-unionised companies naturally resist when a union sets about recruiting members. This reaction is due to deep-seated misconception of what unions do, especially what Singapore unions do.

The top executives of MNCs go by the reputation of unions elsewhere. In their home countries, trade unions may indeed be confrontational. So when our unions go about recruiting members without first explaining to the management its intentions, it looks like a guerilla action. They then react to block the union.

For example, when the union serves notice on management for recognition, the form is in legal language. Mr Ong Teng Cheong, when he was Secretary General of NTUC, instructed that the wording should be changed to friendlier language. We now have a revised version.

When recognition is won, one of the first acts of the union is to serve notice to negotiate a collective agreement. Again, the notice is framed in legal language, with a demand that the employer reply within say, seven days. The employer's worst fears are confirmed in his mind: the union is an opposing combatant, nor a collaborator. His fears are further fuelled by the efficiency of our unions, when together with the notice, a draft collective agreement in hard, cold legal language is presented.

The union is not being unfriendly. It is merely carrying out its duties in accordance with the law. However, we can make the employer feel more comfortable simply by changing our

approach, using friendlier language and starting to collaborate with the management on improving productivity early rather than following past practice of negotiating terms and conditions of employment as the first priority. We know that better wages come with higher productivity, so if we help raise productivity we are looking after our members' interests.

At the same time, we need a better understanding of unions in Singapore by the employers. While we will make every effort to correct the image of unions, there must also be some effort on the part of employers to understand the Singapore unions.

We are 'in business together'. Our competition is external. We have to compete with other countries. The new GATT agreement will mean increase competition. The more efficient will succeed. Collaboration is necessary for us to become more efficient in order to face this competition successfully. Employers should therefore not regard the union as an adversary.

I look forward to the SMMWU and other unions affiliated to the NTUC to work together to correct the public misconceptions about unions, and to closer cooperation with the employers for higher productivity for the benefit of workers.

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