

SUMMARY OF SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
WHEN HE LAID THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE
SINGAPORE PORT AUTHORITY UNION PREMISES
AT CANTONMENT ROAD ON 28TH MARCH, 1968.

Mr. Chairman, Friends and Fellow-citizens,

I am particularly pleased to be able to participate in your stone-laying foundation ceremony for the new Union premises. My association with your Union over the last fifteen years has given me a great deal of satisfaction.

I have gone through with you, sometimes anxious, but always tumultuous moments. Fifteen years ago, whenever we met here – in fact, right up to 1964 – there was bound to be a crisis of some sort or the other. It caused a stir in Singapore. So it gives me pleasure to be able to come here, not to shake the foundations but to lay the foundations of something good for all of us.

We have cause for congratulations that, inspite of all the shaking we have done, there was a modicum of good sense. When all the froth and the shouting and the fist-waving was over, there remained the need to keep the harbour open and organisation of the Harbour Board, upon which the life-blood of Singapore depended, open and efficient.

There are very few places like Singapore. One of the reasons is there are very few places that have a port like Singapore. We have much to congratulate ourselves. In the nine years since we took over, the Singapore Harbour Board has expanded. It has increased in importance – volume of tonnage handled, number of ships coming in – its position in the world moved up from fifth to fourth busiest port. More important it has provided you a more meaningful life and your children a brighter future.

Sometimes I wonder whether you are not having too many of the good things of life. I have been to some of your flats and have seen not only extra televisions sets with 21” and 23” screens but also hi-fi and many other things which can’t all be enjoyed at the same time. But never mind, so long as you can pay for them. And the best way to pay for them is to work hard. There is no substitute for hard work.

You can have all the application of science and technology to industry. You finally come down to your human digit: what is his performance? Does he put in an honest day's work for an honest day's wage? And it is my job to see that he does.

So when I see reports coming in every six months of people in the Port Singapore Authority doing 70 to 80 hours a week, I say to myself that is not possible. Hard-working though you may be, can any human being of flesh and blood and bones put in 77 or 78 hours per week and claimed that he really worked at his peak for those 77 or 78 hours? I don't believe he can. Therefore, in the next 12 months we are in for some changes. I better take the opportunity in a friendly way to tell you that these changes are coming. You know that some people are going to lose some of their fantastic overtime earnings. Some of them earn 200% in overtime as against their substantive pay. This has to stop. We have tens of thousands of Singapore citizens knocking at the Labour Ministry wanting jobs.

You know what happens when unions do foolish things. Britain, one of the richest, most advanced and industrialised countries in the world, with 400 years of the accumulated savings of empire, in two decades of prodigal living and very unwise trade union practices, has had to devalue the pound not

because of lack of brain-power or managerial skill, but because of unwise trade union practices. These restrictive practices resulted in workers believing that the whole purpose in life is to work less for more pay. Perhaps wealthy, industrialised nations can get away with this. But if countries like Singapore do this, you go bankrupt, not, just devalue the dollar, you literally starve.

As long as my colleagues and I are entrusted with your fate, our duty is to see that you do not starve. One of the ways to make sure that we don't starve is that everybody does a good 44-hour week with perhaps two hours overtime per day. Work 56 hours per week, and conserve your strength so that you will live long and healthy. Don't try to work 80 hours a week or you are either bluffing the management or you are bluffing yourself, and in the end, the country will come to no good.

I rejoice with you at your better homes, as indeed they should be, at the better schools for your children, and universities, bursaries and scholarship for those who are bright, for no door will be barred because you are dock workers. The world is yours provided you have the gumption to make the grade. And that is what is worth striving for. There are very few societies in the world that give these opportunities equally to everybody.

Singapore is like a spinning top or perhaps more like a gyroscope. The moment it stops spinning, it topples and falls down. You can put a gyroscope on the edge of a table or on a string and it will maintain its equilibrium so long as it keeps up the momentum, the dynamism. We keep it up for another 10 years the chances are the momentum will carry the place on for the next hundred years.

Your job as a union here for the next few years is not just to jump around, holding mass rallies for more pay without showing first increased productivity. We have to move away from outmoded practices. With this new union building you have to reach out for new targets. You don't want to shout and run around, get more pay, spend more on beer and whisky and television sets. You want to bring up your children in a more cultivated and educated way. Have a swimming pool, a playing field and kindergartens for your kids. Children can start learning from four or five years old. And this is a society that speaks four different official languages. It is difficult enough to have to learn two – your mother-tongue and one other. When you have to understand a third, it really takes some effort. And that means you start your children early.

All these are things more worthwhile than having the extra television or hi-fi sets.

I hope that this union building will mark a pioneer project in the trade union movement. You were the first union to be registered. For the next four or five years, the Singapore trade unions face this problem: how to keep union morale and memberships up while there is no agitation for more pay without showing increased productivity. We need a lot of rethinking on how to have better organisation, high productivity, and more modern methods of work. So you have to provide other activities, meaningful to your members to keep them together, keep up the esprit de corps, the sense of purpose in collective endeavour. All the social activities help, whether it is sports, and the swimming pool you will have in this new Union premises, whether it is kindergarten, sewing and cooking classes for your daughters and so on. You have to move into new fields of activity to keep your membership active. You have to grow up just as Singapore has to grow up. We live in a dangerous part of the world and if we don't grow up, your children never will.

National Archives of Singapore

Finally, my best wishes with your new building. I hope you will open up new avenues of meaningful trade union activities, not just the slogans and the agitprop. The old slogan was "Down with the employer". But this employer is yours. It is called the Singapore Port Authority. If it makes profits it is ploughed back to the community. If you destroy it you are destroying yourselves. So we had better sit down and all of us do some rethinking.

This community does not and will not stand still. It wants to move forward. We are going to make greater progress. I believe I have the support of the overwhelming majority of you to say this: that we intend that this shall remain one of the most efficient ports in the world, and that we shall all do our utmost to ensure that no ship can turn faster and cheaper in the region than in Singapore.

You are moving into an age where modern technology is altering the whole landscape of international transportation, whether it is jumbo-jets or containerised cargo. Any port that is slack and slow is not going to be a big containerised centre. I think you would like me to be determined, that this shall be a big containerised centre. If we are going to be that, we have to have up-to-date expertise, open, keen mind, and a willingness to learn new ways of doing the job.

National Archives of Singapore
