

REPLY BY THE CHIEF SECRETARY, MR. W.A.C. GOODE,
TO MR. LEE KUAN YEW'S SPEECH ON GENERAL ORDERS
AND GOVERNMENT SERVANTS' RIGHT TO STRIKE MADE ON
THE ADJOURNMENT OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
MEETING ON WEDNESDAY, JULY 17, 1957.

I welcome this opportunity to explain the position of Government servants who go on strike. I think the position is fully understood by the Staff Side of the Civil Service Joint Council and by the leaders of the big staff associations. But there are other sections of the Public Service, particularly those who are led by persons who are not themselves Government servants, who may not yet understand it.

First, let me deplore this continued emphasis on rights rather than on duties. If we would all apply ourselves wholeheartedly to others and to the community, I think our so-called rights would look after themselves and Singapore would be a better place.

Public servants are servants of the public; they have a duty to serve the public, and never should we forget it.

In principle, Government officers hold their offices at pleasure and can be dismissed at any time. But in fact, a Government officer's employment is safe-guarded by rules and regulations designed to give him security of tenure of office subject only to good behaviour. Government servants cannot be sacked arbitrarily by a senior officer as employees in commercial concerns can be and are.

Trade unions developed because of the exploitation of labour by bad employers. It was because the individual worker had no remedy against his boss, that workers banded together into unions, and through union organisation workers were able to bargain collectively with their employer from strength. And they adopted the final weapon of the strike. A strike is a withdrawal of labour by the employees designed to compel the employer to make concessions.

He deliberately terminates his contract of service with his employer and depends on successful negotiations to get his job back.

Government servants have never been in the same position as other workers. They have always been protected from victimisation and unfair treatment by a code of service regulations. They have always had security of office — a fundamental characteristic of all responsible employment by a Government; and indeed a characteristic that has often been criticised by the public. The greater the responsibility of the officer, the more protection does he get from arbitrary dismissal or unfair treatment. Officers on the pensionable establishment can only be dismissed in accordance with a complicated semi-judicial procedure.

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These privileges and safeguards of the public service carry with them a corresponding obligation of loyal and conscientious public service — a duty to serve the public and to put the public interest first. And the public rightly expect this loyal service.

Striking is clearly inconsistent with loyal service to the public. It puts the interests of those going on strike above the interests of those they serve. But what, it may be asked, about genuine grievances? How are they to be put right if public servants are not to strike? Again, Government servants are in a specially favoured position.

First, they are employed, not by an individual boss, but by the Government—— and the Government is answerable both to this Assembly and to public opinion. Secondly, every officer has a right of appeal from his immediate superior right up to the Governor, if necessary.

Thirdly, we have strong Staff Associations able to talk with authority and influence. Fourthly, we have the Civil Service Joint Council, able to discuss staff problems and grievances at the highest level. A staff association that gets the full backing of the Staff Side of the Joint Council to its representations is certain of the utmost consideration.

And finally, the constituent members of the Staff Side of the Joint Council have the right to take the Government to arbitration — the right to compel the Government to submit the dispute to impartial arbitration. A right that several staff associations have used recently.

A strike should be the last resort of any association of public servants, remembering both their primary duty to serve the public and the very special means at their disposal for settling their grievances without resorting to a strike.

But in the last resort, if Government servants insist on strike action, they are at liberty to take it. As was stated in this House on May 22 last, the Government recognises the fundamental right of a trade union to strike.

When an employee goes on strike, he withdraws his labour or service from his employer. He thus terminates his contract and puts his re-engagement at risk.

When a Government servant thus terminates his employment by going on strike, he not only breaks faith with his duty of service to the public who pay him and safeguard him from arbitrary treatment, but he also faces certain particular consequences that flow from his position as a public servant whose terms and conditions of service are governed by statutory rules and regulations. It is important that all Government servants should be fully aware of these consequences before they resort to strike action.

A Government servant who is absent from duty on strike breaks his service just as any other striker does. But it follows from this break in service that his pension and other service benefits will be seriously prejudiced.

Government pensions are governed by law; and the law says, quite rightly, that to count for pension, service must be continuous. Therefore, a break in service caused by striking will automatically forfeit for pension purposes all service prior to the strike.

This is a very serious consequence. It stems from the provisions of the Pensions Ordinance and from General Orders. To make sure that Government servants do not go on strike, forgetting that they stand to forfeit all their previous service, we have recently issued specific warnings to all who are reported to be considering strike action. We want to make them realise that their position is not the same as the position of employees of bus companies or rubber factories.

The member for Tanjong Pagar pointed out there was no difference between a private employee and a Government employee. There is quite a fundamental difference.. For a public servant his conditions of service are governed by the law. It is not a matter simply of direct bargaining between a number of employees and an employer.

I do not feel any remorse in the warning issued, and what we did was to tell these people in the Customs Dept., and the Education Dept. In the Customs Dept., they were reminded that if they went on strike they would be open to dismissal under General Orders. The General Orders says that if you are absent from duty for a period of more than seven days you may be held to have vacated your office, and absence from duty will be a break of service for which no pay can be given.

The important thing is to bring home to the public servant that if they go on strike they stand to lose a great deal more than an ordinary employee.

I was told that some years ago in Nigeria it was necessary to enact special legislation through the Legislature to enable a period during which railway workers who had been on strike to count for pension purposes. I mention this to show that there are very serious difficulties stemming from strike action by Government servants who are pensionable.

When a man is a pensionable public servant then the strike should be the very last resort he takes. If he does take it, he does so at his peril.

JULY 17, 1957.

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