

CLOSING ADDRESS BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, NTUC SECRETARY-GENERAL
AT THE NTUC ORDINARY DELEGATES CONFERENCE ON
TUESDAY, 4 NOV 80 AT 4.00 PM

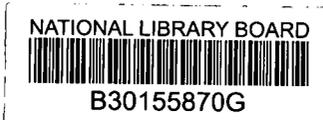
TOWARDS WORK EXCELLENCE - A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Your discussions and deliberations during the past three days reflect your understanding of the pre-conditions that govern our continued progress and the imperatives that determine whether or not our workers shall succeed in securing an even better quality of life. This augurs well for our future. You have clearly indicated that you are willing to make a good job of preparing yourselves to take on the challenges ahead. To you and other workers like you, NTUC's task is to give you every assistance.

You have made many practicable and good suggestions on how we can help our labour force to be more sure footed as we scale greater heights. We all stand to gain from your experience and suggestions. There were also some who for a variety of reasons expressed their apprehension about their future. Our responsibility is to help them face the uncertainty ahead so that they need not be left standing as we make further progress. In this regard, the NTUC can do much to help our rank and file and we will not hesitate to do so.

However, I would like to make one thing clear by repeating a common saying. "God helps those who help themselves." Now NTUC and its affiliates are far from being omnipotent and

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have far less resources at our disposal than God. We are therefore hardly in a good position to help those who opt to stick their heads in the ground like ostriches or go around doing nothing else except wringing their hands and crying out that they are in difficulties. While some managements are prone to this affliction especially after the NWC recommendations are announced every year, it will be sad if workers also caught this disease.

I have been impressed by the speeches and remarks made by some delegates and branch leaders during the workshop sessions. They showed clear-headed thinking and courageous decision-making. Members under their guidance can look forward to a wise leadership and a fruitful relationship. I would urge union leaders to groom these unionists and prepare them to take on greater responsibilities. They will be a credit to the union movement. Fortunately, only a few of the speeches reflected old thinking and narrow vision. Listening to them was like watching an old 35mm black and white movie, quite a contrast to the full technicolour cinemascope understanding some delegates displayed.

I am not referring to the oratorical abilities of the speakers but to the contents and ideas the speeches contained. It was rewarding to listen to those who spoke with conviction and had made remarks worthy of serious consideration. To these delegates who tried to convey their thoughts and problems to all of us, I would like to assure them that we will do all we can to follow-up on their suggestions.

The main recommendations of the seminar and conference workshops have given us a clear idea of the problems and needs of our members. We shall study how we can alleviate their genuine grievances and improve their prospects. In particular, programmes in our Plan of Action for the '80s will be implemented at the appropriate time to help our workers capitalise on whatever opportunities that may present themselves over the next few years.

Among the many suggestions that were made, two stand out as being of the utmost importance and worthy of prompt action. The first is the call to managements to introduce proper career development programmes for workers at all levels. The second is the creation of a channel of communication at the company level for freer consultation and dialogue between managements and workers. These suggestions confirm that workers as a rule are not inherently unreasonable. They want to communicate and contribute towards the company's well-being. All they need is the opportunity and the motivation.

It is clear that to be successful, a management needs to understand the complex reasons that motivate people. What makes the worker tick? Why do people behave as they do? How can the will to excel be stimulated in people who are not inherently lazy? There are, of course, the odd layabouts who are beyond redemption but by and large, Singaporeans are diligent as is demonstrated by their past achievements. What is needed is for the management to find the solutions to all these questions.

In this regard, managements themselves must take steps to educate and upgrade management staff especially those at the middle level. Managers too have to be trained to work with junior employees. When we speak of retraining workers, middle managers and supervisors are not absolved from this need. A situation where the junior employees have been prepared for their wider role of supporting the company and the economy but middle managements are not will be disastrous. Enthusiasm will be quickly dampened if workers find that after they have put in their efforts they still have to deal with the same old and difficult attitudes of managers and personnel officers. The wider objectives can be met only if both employers and employees are equally prepared to make the effort.

An enlightened management will seek to enlarge the areas of worker consultation and joint responsibility at the shopfloor level. In fact this was a prime suggestion which cropped up again and again during the workshop discussions. Cooperation makes so much more sense in terms of efficiency, productivity and developing human relationship. It is mutually beneficial.

Workers will understand the reasons for management decisions when they are well informed. With better communication they will be able to understand the effects of their work performances on the overall company's performance. They are also better assured of their career developments in

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the company and consequently will display an affinity and loyalty to it. The complaint of some workers not showing any concern for the company they work in could have been caused by the fact that these workers, not having been told of what the company's long term plans for them are, do not see their career prospects in these companies. The experiences of the Motorola television plant and the General Motors plant of Tarrytown, New York I cited at the beginning of the seminar demonstrated this very clearly.

Unfortunately, some managements think of workers as indolent, lacking in ambition, abhorring responsibility, inherently self-centred, resistant to change and never to be trusted at all. These managements might have had unpleasant experiences with some bad workers in the past and hence have acquired such attitudes towards employees but there is no reason to tarnish all workers with the same brush. In fact workers tend to conform to the image we have of them. If you think that workers are not to be trusted or are lazy good-for-nothings, then I can assure you that they would not disappoint you. By the same token, if a worker sees in every manager or supervisor as a potential slave driver out to exploit and victimize him, then he too would not be disappointed.

The question then is how do we go about promoting closer employer-employee consultation. I have mentioned during my inaugural address that we hope to implement a plan of

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setting up Working Committees at the company level comprising union branch officials and management representatives from that company to look for solutions to the more common employer-employee problems. The thrust of the workshop discussions supports this idea and there is therefore every reason why we would be pressing ahead with this plan. Managements should respond to such overtures from the workers in a manner fitting to the tripartite spirit which they subscribe to. Perhaps I can take this opportunity to make an announcement which will give management a spur in the right direction.

Over the past one and a half months, the NTUC and two of its affiliates have been working out with two managements a scheme which will help to bring about better union-management relations. The affiliates are the Sembawang Shipyard Employees' Union and the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers' Union. The managements are Sembawang Shipyard Ltd and Shangri-la Hotel Ltd.

The main objective of the scheme is for both the unions and managements to get together and try to identify objectively the strong points and weaknesses of the union-management relationships in their respective establishments. The idea is to zero in on the areas that need improvements and then jointly draw up a framework for making the improvements that are necessary. The areas which will be scrutinized, apart from the channel of communications between employers and employees, will include the present management and union

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practices which are causing poor harmonious relations, low productivity, and a lack of team work and loyalty to the company or which are encouraging managers to treat workers with the respect and dignity due them but merely as digits of production.

I must stress that this joint effort to enhance the performance of the workers and the management requires a very good climate of understanding in these establishments. It also requires a very large dose of courage and conviction on the part of the branch and union leaders on the one hand and management staff on the other. They must be sufficiently confident and willing to change defective union or management policies if it is found that such policies are obstructing the development of the workers and the company. Obviously, mutual understanding and much give and take will be of primary importance.

The whole purpose of the exercise is not for one party to look for excuses to point a finger at the other party. The ultimate aim is for management and workers to work together so as to upgrade work conditions, product quality, and productivity for mutual benefit.

These two plans, which also involve representatives from EDB, NPB, VITB and the Ministry of Labour, are expected to be finalised in a few months' time. Discussions held so far by the 3 parties have shown that the two managements and the

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two unions are totally committed to wanting to further improve employer-employee relationships. Such a practical approach to create work excellence augurs well for our objective of creating a quality workforce - quality not only in employees but also in management staff.

These two plans will be implemented in parallel to our plan to set up the Working Committees in the industrial sector represented by SILO and PIEU. The willingness to participate in these projects shown by the Sembawang Shipyard Employees' Union, Food, Drinks and Allied Workers' Union, SILO and PIEU, should reassure managements the seriousness of our intentions. Let us therefore not get side tracked by the nitty gritty but rather work for the larger interest.

The unions have made the first move this time. I hope the managements' response will not be aimed at check-mating the unions and the workers. If they do, the chess board may be taken away and we will then be playing in the dark when every move will take an inordinately long time to make and one party or the other is likely to end up over the edge of the board with disastrous consequences for all.

This seminar and conference started with a relatively ambitious objective - "Work and Excel for an Even Better Quality of Life". There might have been some who might even have been cynical about the theme. However, the seminar and conference discussions and recommendations have given me confidence that we have not been too ambitious and that the few cynics we may have around us will be proved wrong.

Our workers have gone through much to earn the benefits they enjoy today. They will not throw everything away by succumbing to soft options. They are fully aware that in the present state of global uncertainty, our only route to further progress is further toil. What spurs them on is the knowledge and confidence that if joint efforts are made and progress is consequently achieved, then the whole team benefits materially. This has been and will continue to be the guiding principle for our workers, our unions and our people.
