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SPEECH BY DR WAN SOON BEE, MINISTER OF STATE  
AT FPAWU SEMINAR ON "TOWARDS A BETTER LABOUR/  
MANAGEMENT CO-OPERATION" AT THE HYATT HOTEL  
ON SATURDAY 6 OCTOBER 1984 AT 9.30 AM

Your seminar today deserves high commendation. The theme itself bespeaks the importance of and need for cultivating good and harmonious relationship between labour and management to further enhance the quality of working life of workers in the hotel industry. Twenty or thirty years ago, such a seminar would not have been thought of by a union, let alone its theme.

Our labour movement has come a long way. When trade unions were formed in Singapore, soon after the Second World War their common objective was to fight the manipulative and exploitative manoeuvres of unscrupulous employers. In those days wage earnings were low, working conditions were unsafe and unbearable, and, worse still, there was no appropriate conciliation machinery to handle labour grievances or disputes. Workers had to labour hard and were at the mercy of their employers. Under such circumstances, workers were compelled to team up and organise into unions in order to protect and promote their economic and welfare benefits. Unions had to fight hard to obtain agreement from employers to ensure some semblance of fair wages and better working conditions. During the 1950s, trade unions became the forerunner of anti-colonial struggle for independence. Later, some unions became a source of political influence of the communists and their sympathisers. Strikes and street riots were often staged not to defy employers but to create community tensions and to incite social instability.

This was the scenario some two to three decades ago. However, trade union movement today is vastly different. It has taken a much wider perspective and role in social and economic developments of Singapore. Trade unions have shifted their confrontation approach to one of cooperation with employers and management to bring about long-term employment security and higher standard of living for our workers. Singapore has achieved, in recent years, industrial peace through the enlightened and positive cooperation between trade unions and employers.

The traditional "them and us" attitude between labour and management which Singapore inherited from the British colonial days is negative and counter-productive. It is also a perpetual source of mistrust and conflict. However, we have since transformed this attitude into a cooperative "we" spirit. The theme of this seminar is a clear demonstration that both labour and management desire good and harmonious relationship.

Whilst some of our Western trade union counterparts do not regard our productivity movement launched three years ago, as a means to improve the long-term interest of our workers, Singapore trade unions and their members have taken a bold, courageous and positive step in this direction. Our unions firmly believe that higher productivity is our key to social and economic progress. Many critics have argued against trade unions' involvement in the productivity movement as this would lead to displacement of workers. In Singapore we do not subscribe to such argument.

We believe and have shown that higher productivity has helped to create more jobs as our products and services are more competitive in the world market. At the same time we would be in a better position to attract more foreign investments into Singapore.

The situation, of course, is totally different in Britain or West Germany. Take the six-month old coal miners' strike for instance. The coal miners are on strike because they are against the closure of unproductive, uneconomical and inefficient coal mines. Earlier this year, West German metal workers were on strike to demand shorter work hours in order to create more employment opportunities for the unemployed. We have, instead, emphasised on promoting higher productivity and good labour-management nexus to ensure better long-term job security and higher wages for our workers.

Whilst our trade unions have played a significant role in supporting and encouraging their members and workers in general to be productive conscious, employers and top managers must likewise demonstrate their commitment to higher productivity. Managements should take full advantage of the momentum already generated by the productivity movement in the Republic. If they do so, the benefit derived would mean greater economic returns for all concerned. The success of the productivity movement would be the best expression of the commitment shared by both workers and employers towards achieving better labour-management relations.

Today, as the world economy is still plagued by high unemployment, unresolved Third World debt problem, rising tide of trade protectionism and weak economic recovery, it remains crucial that we in Singapore, workers, employers and the government should continue to work as a team. It is through teamwork and higher productivity both at the enterprise and national levels that the Singapore economy has performed well and our workers continue to enjoy full employment despite world-wide recession in the last few years.

On this note, it is now my pleasure to declare the Seminar open.

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