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SPEECH BY DR WAN SOON BEE, MINISTER OF STATE
(PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE), AT THE HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT
BOARD (HDB) DAILY-RATED EMPLOYEES UNION'S SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS
PRESENTATION CEREMONY 1985 HELD AT THE DBS AUDITORIUM
ON SATURDAY, 21 DECEMBER 1985 AT 10.30 AM

I am happy to be here this morning for the scholarship presentation ceremony of your Union. I am told that 15 children of members who are studying in the National University of Singapore will receive financial assistance from the HDB Daily-rated Employees' Union. In addition about 250 children of members who have been successful in the PSLE and have been promoted to Secondary One will receive cash awards for the purchase of textbooks. Another 150 children who are entering Primary One will be given school bags. In addition 10 of the top scorers in the PSLE will also get prizes. In all some 415 children will benefit from grants and awards made available by the Union all directed towards education and encouraging good academic results.

This is indeed an excellent example set by your Union in education by assisting with scholarships and bursaries for children of members.

This also indicates the emphasis the Union has placed on education. It has rightly recognised the education of children as a sound investment for the future.

Education as you know, is a life-long process. We cannot and must not ever stop learning. No one is too old or too young to learn. Continuing education is a reality and has become more so in a fast developing and changing world.

In less than half a century, we have moved from the bullock cart age to the era of high technology and super-sonic travel.

And with the rapid developments in technology and innovation comes the need for a workforce equally suited to the demands of new work systems.

It is no longer possible for a worker in whatever trade, to be able to function with just basic skills acquired some time ago. Re-training and upgrading must take place at all levels of the workforce. Workers must therefore upgrade their skills constantly in order to cope with new technology. Not to do so is to risk being left out as everyone else progresses in his or her job.

Just about ten years ago, some of our daily-rated workers had to use 'changkuls' and spades to dig trenches on the roads when laying cables and water pipes. Today, a single worker operating an excavator can do within hours what a gang of labourers would have taken a whole day to complete.

Similarly, a bus conductor is now a rare sight with the one-man-operated (OMO) bus system where the driver does the ticketing through an automatic fare collector and ticket dispenser.

What port workers had to carry on their backs is now performed effortlessly by one person operating a forklift.

And in the office, what a clerk spend hours typing on a manual typewriter can now be done in minutes by a word processor. Complicated and repetitive calculations made by an accounts clerk mentally can now be done speedily by using an electronic calculator.

Now, if the worker who was used to digging with a changkul did not learn to operate an excavator; or a bus conductor did not re-train as a driver; and a clerk did not learn to operate a word processor, they could have found themselves redundant.

With innovations and modern inventions come a threat to job security if workers cannot keep with the rapid pace of development. There is no alternative but to cope with change by upgrading and improving our skills.

The call for skills upgrading and re-training is as relevant to HDB workers as it is for a worker in any other sector.

The harsh reality is that unless our workers in all sectors are trained in new or higher level skills, they will eventually find themselves redundant.

We must all consciously seek opportunities to upgrade ourselves in order to attract high capital investments to Singapore, for our long-term job stability and for continued wage increases. Technological changes need not be viewed as a threat to our jobs if we are prepared to meet the demands of the change with appropriate skills and training.

That is why we have to accept skills upgrading and re-training as a fact of life in a fast developing world.

Moreover, new entrants to the job market are better trained and educated. The proportion of skilled and trained workers entering the workforce will increase over that of workers with basic or no skills at all as our training and educational institutions expand their yearly intakes.

There are ample opportunities for our workers to go for skills upgrading and re-training.

Most companies and establishments, including the HDB, have in-house training for all levels of staff.

Then there are self-improving courses which one can take on a part-time basis at various training institutions.

And for those who have missed out on Primary education, the NTUC and VITB conduct the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) programme. On successfully completing the BEST programme, workers can apply for skills training or continuing education courses conducted by the VITB.

Some of our trade unions also conduct skills upgrading courses and some offer training grants and bursaries.

I would like to urge more of our unions to promote skills upgrading and re-training and to give it priority in these bad economic times.

On this note, may I congratulate all the students who have won awards today and wish them every success. I hope this award will spur you on to do better in the coming years.

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