

# SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS RELEASE

PUBLICITY DIVISION · MINISTRY OF CULTURE · CITY HALL SINGAPORE 6

MC/JUL/33/78 (Labour)

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SECRETARY (LABOUR), AT THE CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCY  
FOR MOBILE CRANE OPERATORS PRESENTATION CEREMONY  
AT PSA TOWERS ON FRIDAY, 21 JULY 78 AT 7.00 PM

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May I first of all place on record my Ministry's appreciation to the Port of Singapore Authority and the Industrial Training Board for their joint efforts in conducting this first Training Course for Mobile Crane Operators. It is gratifying to learn, from information given by my officers, that those involved in the organisation of the Course have been most helpful and diligent.

I recall somebody once said, that one death is a tragedy but if a hundred or thousands die, it would be merely a matter of statistics. I am glad that we have not reached, or ever will reach that frame of mind insofar as the health, life and death of our workers are concerned. In fact, I lapsed into some philosophical moments when I received the invitation to this occasion. An old saying lingered in my mind for some time. I quote: "He who knows, and knows not that he knows is ignorant, teach him. He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not is a fool, leave him."

There is another stanza to this saying, may I again quote: "He who knows, and knows that he knows is wise, follow him." However, I am more than tempted to develop this axiom a little further for the benefit and attention of those employers and supervisory personnel who deal in safety and health matters, this addition: "He who knows, and knows that he knows, but proposes to do nothing about it, kick him!"

The Mobile Crane Operators Training Course somewhat fitted well into this situation. For many years now, mobile cranes have been a feature in our industrial activities. With rapid expansion of the economy, the industrial sector has become, and will remain as the top economic spinner. Material handling has become more and more commonplace. The lifting of heavy plants and equipment weighing over hundred tons per piece,

unheard of in Singapore two decades ago, is becoming more and more a common undertaking. Manual material handling is increasingly being replaced by mechanical material handling equipment. Among these handling devices, mobile cranes are perhaps the most useful and versatile.

The increase in demand for mobile cranes as a material handling device has in turn generated a great demand for mobile crane operators. But few paid attention to the need for training for these operators. The situation, by and large, remains the same that such workers, with only rudimentary induction, and thereafter they are to learn on-the-job. Truck drivers double up as crane operators.

Two types of mobile cranes are in use. The first type is the commercially marketed and specially designed mobile crane which comes in with at least some information/its operations and on maintenance. The other type is locally constructed with the crane mounted on trucks adapted for the purpose. I was concerned first as to the mechanical soundness of these cranes and on my enquiry, I have been informed that only one study was made into this, but the result was not widely known. However, more cranes were locally constructed basing on the same design. I do not think that we should place any undue restriction on these cranes provided they are mechanically sound and safe. ROV has certain standards imposed on them.

In the meanwhile, both these types of cranes are being operated by truck drivers doubling up as operators without any knowledge at all as to the strength and stress of the steel work, particularly the boom, its operational and manoeuvre and its hazards. Sometimes it is a harrowing sight to witness the operations of these monsters. The situation is compounded by the absence of knowledge of those behind the controls. It is true that after some time on-the-job, experience is gained and the operators know that if you pull a certain lever or activate a button, these skeleton robots will move in a certain

manner to perform a function, but he does not know why and how. One mechanic, while repairing a tractor, was crushed and killed by the "bucket arm" because somebody forgot to put on the safety lever. Although this was a tractor, the situation is similar to a crane.

In 1977 alone, there was a total of 54 accidents involving the use of mobile cranes and 4 workers were killed in these mishaps. Investigations by my officers revealed that human failure on the part of the operators was the cause of these accidents. The operators were either lacking in safety knowledge or ignorant of the capability of the cranes they were operating.

I should imagine that we have gone beyond the stage of learning on-the-job. Training courses and training institutions are available to prepare our workers for efficient handling and operating of equipment. Unfortunately, there appears to be a lack of opportunity open for those who are already on-the-job but without sufficient knowledge or skill to increase their efficiency and safety. In this regard, I am pleased to note that the ITB, in conjunction with certain industries, have adopted a scheme to conduct courses to upgrade the skills of the workers. Whilst the various vocational institutes under the ITB's umbrella are doing a fine job in training our next generation workers to equip them with the skill and knowledge for meaningful employment. One area, which I feel more thoughts should be given, is the opportunity for present unskilled workers who may wish to acquire a skill to enhance their prospects. There is in existence an arrangement between the ITB and the industries to conduct part-time courses for workers engaged in certain operations. What is absent is that unskilled workers in the industries as well as some white-collar workers who may wish to embark upon a technical career and hence a more meaningful employment, do not have the opportunity to acquire the training or skill as they cannot be accommodated in the various courses of the ITB, either due to lack of educational qualifications or due to the nature of their present employment.

It is important that we must examine the possibility that this pool of workers who can be turned into skilled technicians to man the various industrial processes in our factories. I suggest the ITB, which have now merged with the AEB to probe into this matter, now that their resources and manpower are more co-ordinated.

Workers' safety should not be viewed in isolation. The whole question involves work ethos, pride of work and most important, the amount of knowledge a worker has on the assignment given to him. ~~A knowledgeable worker is a safe worker,~~ and a safe worker is an efficient and productive worker. Safety should be viewed as an integral part of good work ethos.

The question of licensing the crane operators has been in my mind for some time. These mobile vehicles run on our public roads and their operation at worksites or other locations is a matter of concern not only for the operators' own safety but also that of the public or workers in the immediate vicinity. It is prudent that certain amount of control must be exercised and definitely certain standards must be achieved before a person is allowed to operate such heavy equipment. The Ministry's decision to hold in abeyance the question of licensing of mobile crane operators is due to our concern that premature action in this direction may disrupt the activities of our industries. When sufficient number of them are trained, the question of licensing will be reviewed.

To those who receive your certificates today, I congratulate you for your efforts. Your very presence in this Course underlines your understanding of the situation and I must say that your knowledge acquired in this Course value far beyond the certificates. You will stand in good stead when licensing comes.

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