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SPEECH BY MR FONG SIP CHEE, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY (LABOUR), AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE
"INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SEMINAR FOR FOREIGN MANAGERS"
ORGANISED BY THE NATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY BOARD AT
THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON FRIDAY, 21 SEP 79 AT 9.00 AM

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When Dr Lee Chiaw Meng informed me of the theme for this Seminar, which is specially organised for the benefit of the foreign managers, he really revived and brought into the open the very question which has been in the minds of my officers and the leadership in the Ministry.

The special problem confronting the foreign managers in the matter of industrial relations in Singapore is not new to us. We have, in fact, been living with this question ever since we embarked on our industrialisation programme. From the conversations I have with workers and foreign management people, and the feedbacks I received, the question is really one of mutual adaptation between the foreign and the local parties.

Unfortunately, adaptation so far has been one based on gross misjudgement of one another without actually appreciating the rationale, different social structures and background and the behavioral patterns of the parties concerned. This situation is further aggravated by the ever present pressure on speeding up productivity and efficiency which appears to supercede all other considerations. In plain term, there has been no time to take a closer look at the intrinsic values of real good industrial relations based on mutual understanding.

This is not to say that these undercurrents, if I may loosely borrow the term, have reached problematic proportions. On the contrary, these discussions amongst employers, union leaders and the workers have been useful in that the matter is not just swept under the carpet. It is a healthy sign that our workers have come of age. They actually discuss these matters without fear or inhibition rather than have them accumulated to be used as fuel and ammunition over the negotiation table.

This is a natural development - the result of a better educated workforce and more enlightened union leadership. We have gone through the stages in the 50s and the 60s when the expatriate managers were always being depicted in the poorest light. The 60s saw a better appreciation by our workers on the presence, and the need for the presence of these foreign executives on our industrial scene. They no longer appear ugly. But there still exist some amount of suspicion, at best reservation.

The present day foreign managers command a higher respect quite different from those days when they were referred to 'kuai lo's' -- a term for the old breed of caucasians who were the predominant force in the foreign managers community. This term was however used equally in detest and endearment, depending on the circumstances.

The 'kuai los' indeed had an edge over the counterparts of today. Many of them had been here for a long time and it was not uncommon that some of them even converse effectively with the local workers in the latter's dialects. The same advantage seems to be an unprofitable and unnecessary exercise now.

Today, the 'kuai los' have not totally disappeared. If anything, there is an increase in their numbers. But the 'kuai' has disappeared. In its place are the proper and respectable terms like American, Japanese, German, the British and the Taiwanese to qualify the 'los' which is still very much in use.

These foreign investors and their management personnel play a vital role in our progress and the sustenance of a society which is the envy of many. They have their right of place in Singapore and our workers accept that.

What irks the two parties most is really one single problem - the conflict between two or more systems of industrial relations at play at the same time. Each party offers its own views and value over a single matter and both seems to be as much correct as they are at fault. It is the different styles, norms, concept of discipline, expectation, language, behavioral peculiarities and social structures inter-reacting, inter-probing but without being able to find the common ground. How much do we understand when one party says something which in all his honesty is completely normal and harmless in his own social background and yet the other party promptly takes offence?

I have had several discussions with my officers on this subject, and I find that these unnecessary 'skirmishes' in industrial relations are not peculiar to the foreign managers alone. They are also prevalent among our local managers. The only difference is that it is more pronounced in the case involving the foreign managers.

This I temporarily conclude to be a problem of ignorance of the laws and their spirit, as examples have shown that many, in fact far too many of these strained employer/employee relations were the result of poor personnel management.

It would have been a very much simpler matter if it is indeed a problem of ignorance of the law alone. In that case, solutions may be quite easily prescribed. It is not so. Very often, the problem is compounded by prejudices already existing in both parties and poor human relationship over a period of time.

Let me give you an example for purposes of illustration. I had an occasion to visit a foreign owned establishment in one of my tours to factories. I was well received at the foyer at the ground floor of that block of flatted factories by the personnel officer and his reception party comprising his subordinates. Normal courtesies were exchanged and we proceeded to tour the plant which occupied three of the upper floors.

Everything went on fine until we were approaching the office of the Manager Director, when the personnel officer, in his good intention and impeccably pleasant manners, inquired of me if I would like to say hello to his boss, whom he said had been waiting in his office. I told him that I did not know the company had a manager director and even it had one that morning, I betted that he was not in the office. The personnel officer made the mistake of proving me wrong by actually producing his boss in person. With a few customary knocks at the door, he announced: 'Mr Fong is here, Mr Foreign Manager. Would you like to see him now!'

I am not complaining over this breach of courtesy which I dismissed as just one of those indiscreet actions. What I wanted to know very much was that if that could happen to me, what could come off in the company's relationship with the staff? Subsequent reports from my inspectors confirmed that my fear was not without good reasons.

Now let us take a look at the other side of the coin. Foreign Manager also complained to me that our workers never seemed to be able to take a straight order, poor work discipline and work ethics almost unheard of. Workers on the other hand observed that the foreign managers could never give a single instruction without being offensive and slave driving.

The height of all these 'misunderstanding' came in the most bizarre example when another foreign top executive was trying to impress me how much he knew our workers. Here is his impression. He said: "When I was posted out here, I was reminded that when in Rome, do as the Romans do". He added: "I have had two years experience in a certain company in country X (referring to an Asian country). You can't get the indolent workers to do anything there! So when I am posted to Singapore, I knew what I have on my hands! I assured him that Singaporeans were not that kind of "Romans" he had in mind and said that I did not know if his comparison of Singaporeans to his Romans was meant to be a compliment or otherwise.

So this gentleman used insolence to tackle indolence, and we have become in his eyes that kind of "Romans". Let us see how some of the centurions - the personnel officers handle his men and how he tried so hard to hide his problem from the General and his "war council". My Director of Labour Relations Division confirmed that it is not uncommon that personnel officers, when confronted with problems, fight shy to bring the matters up to the foreign managers for fear of being accused of being inefficient. Most of these type of personnel officers ill-advised the management and blunder from one mistake to another until we have to step in, only to discover that the problem can actually be solve quite easily to the satisfaction of both parties.

I have always caution my officers that they should not think that we can make a Singaporean out of a Japanese, an American, a Britisher, or a Taiwanese or German in a matter of a few years, if at all it is possible. On the other hand, the foreign managers should not at the same time think that they can make Singapore workers behave and think like their compatriots back home. Somewhere, somehow, and sometime, there may evolve a happy balance, but certainly not before both sides make a conscious effort to understand the norms and styles of one another.

To begin with, the Ministry's officers must first enrich themselves. I have asked, and my officers did arrange for a former senior staff of our embassy in one of the investor country to talk to our staff about the thinking, way of expression in conversation and accepted methods of working in the country to which he had acquired valuable insights through his appointment there for a number of years.

Perhaps the foreign managers, after they have sufficiently studied the local labour legislations and having understood the spirits behind which why certain laws have been written in that particular manner to cater for the local condition, should take just that little step further to try to involve themselves with the workers and their union activities. It is through their informal social contacts that one can acquire a better insight into the inner essence of a community. On the other hand, the foreign managers can also acquaint our workers with things of their own, even the taste of traditional food items or the sight of national costume of the various countries where these foreign managers come from should find excitement in our workers.

For one will not pamper our workers. They are now better educated, comparatively better trained and their union officials, under the guidance of the NTUC, should understand their role they play to ensure a better place for all in Singapore. They understand and they are reasonable people, if only they are reasonably treated. Singaporeans are a recaptive community.

The Seminar is most timely. I have been informed that you have on the work schedule a hosts of problems which you hope to find solutions to. Perhaps, I have deviated from the central theme and skirted the issues you consider more important and crucial than the human aspect which I have mentioned. I only hope that you will share the view that in a newly industrialised society, human behaviour takes a queer and unique turn when compared with those of you who have been privileged to have come from countries where you have gone through our experience many decades ago. No law can completely regulate human behaviour, it is only through interaction of people that the synthesis will finally emerge. This may take even longer time than your own countries have experienced, but it is worthwhile to make a start.

I have no doubt that the Seminar will have very fruitful deliberations.