

Singapore Government **PRESS RELEASE**

Information Division, Ministry of Culture, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • tel: 3378191, ext. 352, 353, 354/3362207/3362271

National Archives and
Records Centre, Singapore

12-3/80/10/01 OCT 1980

Acc. No.	NARC
80 0068	48

SPEECH BY MR FONG SIP CHEE, SENIOR PARLIAMENTARY
SECRETARY TO THE MINISTER FOR LABOUR, AT THE OPENING
CEREMONY OF THE WOODWORKING INDUSTRY SAFETY MONTH,
1980 AND SEMINAR AT THE SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON
WEDNESDAY, 1 OCTOBER 1980 AT 9.00 AM

It is difficult not to indulge in flogging old issues, when discussing industrial safety and health. These oft-performed, frequently frustrating exercises underline the absence of positive responses from the various parties most concerned with the problem. There have been of course no lacking in verbal pledges, even seemingly credible efforts in the many open discussions and seminars organised by various bodies. However, many questions still linger in our minds: What happen after those fleeting appearances and publicity? How many of the recommendations were actually implemented? How effective were they? Was there any built in monitoring-system which will keep constant tabs on the situation? Or were those recommendations have been found to be lacking either in direction or practicability?

Perhaps, a consoling exception is the shipbuilding and repair industry which actually implemented a good number of projects initiated by the Advisory Committee. The construction industry did make some effort, but not without some amount of coercion from the government.

Pledges of support have always been forthcoming and there, is no lacking in the understanding of the problem. Unfortunately, these have not been reinforced by positive commitment.

Four years ago, in 1976, the Ministry extended to the woodworking industry a challenge to assume a major, indeed rightful role in spearheading a sustained programme to tackle the problem of safety and health in the industry. It was intended to harness the

interest, commitment and enthusiasm of a group of people who have expressed a keanness to face the problem squarely.

Whilst the achievements of the committee so far have not earned enough merits for an accolado, its efforts are nevertheless praiseworthy. I have been told that the working group has weathered well the test and I am pleased to note that there are signs that its efforts are beginning to bear fruit.

Accidents in the woodworking industry rose to an all-time high in 1975. Severity rate in that year olimbed to 769* and the frequency rate registered 13.3**. Four years of hard work have brought about a significant decline of the severity rate to 276 and frequency rate to 9.9, representing a drop of 64 per cent and 26 per cent respectively. This encouraging development is however tarnished by the fact that accidents in this industry still maintain its fourth position on the table for the most accident-prone industries, coming after the construction, shipbuilding and repair and metal industries. The 491 accidents in this industry represent 9.3 per cent of the total number of cases reported in 1979.

I do not propose to go into technical details this morning. This is the job for your committee. Enough have been said to apportion responsibility, causes and effects. It is humanly possible to surmount problems in these areas with complementary enforcement and regulatory measures on the part of the Ministry.

The government can introduce stringent laws, but we cannot legislate 'attitude'. In a way, the industrial safety situation reflects the attitude of both the workers and the management. I hardly expect an employer to expect workers to respond to any scheme to improve productivity if the welfare and safety of the workers are not given proper attention. Similarly, a worker cannot be interested in higher productivity if he is not even interested in the safety of his own life.

* man-days lost per million man-hours worked.

** accidents per million man-hours worked.

The source of the problem is the attitude of both the employers and the workers. They cannot sit back and let the government take the lead in almost every aspect affecting their own interests. Understanding of the problem there is, but the question of how to commit oneself towards its solution and how to translate the commitment into action, remains a problem that haunts our conscience.

I am told that a seminar will be held after this Opening Ceremony. I hope that the organising committee will use this opportunity to examine its role and to widen its scope of action. The campaign month for the industry should not lend itself to be yet another annual eye-wash. I hope your findings will entrench a programme to ensure that safety and health efforts be made a drily undertaking by both the employers and the workers. It requires more than seminars and campaigns to correct a state of the mind which has manifested in the poor working attitude either in the area of safety or productivity. This self-inflicted handicap has hampered our progress. It must be eradicated at all costs.

I wish this campaign all the success.
