

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
18-0/80/10/10 18 OCT 1980

Acc. No. NARC
80 0131 12

SPEECH BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, SECRETARY-GENERAL NTUC AND
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO AT THE 8TH BIENNIAL DELEGATES
CONFERENCE OF THE FOOD, DRINKS AND ALLIED WORKERS' UNION
AT THE MANDARIN BALLROOM ON FRIDAY, 10 OCT 80 AT 10.00 AM

Trade unionism is not a recent phenomenon, not even in developing countries. For example, in India, trade unions already existed in the late 1800s. There is therefore every reason to expect that the union movement of today is much more mature in outlook and character compared with the early days of the movement when trade unions were just bands of workers gathered together to protect their own lives and those of their families.

In the developed countries, unions mushroomed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. Poverty was then rampant amongst the working classes. Exploitation of workers, child labour and other equally appalling work and social conditions were the order of the day. There were compelling reasons for workers to seek out all possible ways and means of safeguarding their own interests. It was a question of survival.

In the developing countries, especially in former colonies, unions had another role in addition to that of protecting workers. In these countries, unions were part of the independence movements and most of them were consequently avowedly anti-colonial. It was therefore not surprising that colonial administrators and foreign business interests in these countries generally viewed unions with suspicion. They were hostile towards unions and made it difficult for them to develop. Hence many remained fledgeling organisations. In most cases it was only after a country's independence that unions there were given the opportunity to play a larger and more meaningful role in the community.

Notwithstanding the different origins which unions in developed and developing countries had, most of them grew and found greater strength over the years. The factor that contributed significantly to trade union strength in most countries was the rapid increase in the workforce which enlarged the potential pool of union members. This situation was of course made possible by the growing national economy. The improved political and social stability attracted more investments and created more job opportunities. Unions in countries whose economies floundered for a variety of reasons either remained weak or grew marginally, not only in terms of membership but also with respect to their contributions to and participation in national development. It is clear from this that generally the development and strength of unions in a country are inextricably linked with the health of that nation's economy.

As far as our own experience in Singapore is concerned, the veterans and older unionists amongst you will be very familiar with the circumstances in which our trade union movement was established. You will have vivid memories of how NTUC and its affiliates struggled for survival. You will have followed our movement's progress to its present state where unions are part and parcel of our political and social scene and workers are contributors to and co-owners of our economy. Our younger workers may not have the vivid memories of the '50s and the '60, but they certainly are enjoying the efforts and sacrifices of our early union leaders whose contributions will surely be recorded in the annals of our labour movement and in the history of Singapore.

This 8th Biennial Delegates Conference of the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers' Union, and those of the NTUC's 52 other affiliates which are also held regularly, are a clear testimony to the health and strength of our union movement. There is no doubt that our unions have not only grown in size but they have also become an integral part of our political, economic and social framework. The danger is that we may take this fact for granted and forget the pre-conditions that must exist to permit such a situation to flourish.

The most unionists, the holding of a Delegates Conference or conducting the elections of union office bearers are the most natural events in the union's calendar. Similarly collective bargaining, the right to represent workers' legitimate grievances and organising the unorganised are activities of the union movement which are usually taken for granted. Unless we jolt our memories every now and then our younger union members may gradually lose their appreciation of these rights which we enjoy. It will therefore be worth our while to briefly examine what workers in some countries have to put up with and the conditions in which they have to operate as unionists and live as workers. Since Polish unions have been in the news lately, I propose to examine very briefly the circumstances which led to the upheaval faced by the Polish workers.

The wave of illegal strikes which shook Polish industries some months ago could be attributed to gross mismanagement of their economic and social programmes by the Polish government. There are many reasons for this mismanagement but one reason could be the fact that the country's industrial and social planning was inflexible and was unable to adapt to changing circumstances. This shortcoming is inherent in the Polish political system where every single social and economic activity is centralised and controlled by the communist bureaucracy.

An effective way of understanding the rationale for the Polish unrest is to look at the major reforms the Polish strikers seek. This will give us an idea of the causes for dissatisfaction amongst Polish workers.

According to a list issued by a Warsaw-based dissident group, the major concessions sought by the striking workers in the Baltic port of Gdansk were as follows:

- (i) Abolishment of privileges for security services and liquidation of special shops open only to police and communist party officials.
- (ii) Abolishment of the system under which quality meat is sold only in special shops at high prices.

- (iii) Full supplies on the domestic market with only surplus commodities exported.
- (iv) Introduction of meat rationing to make the market stable.
- (v) Salary increases by an average of 2,000 zlotys (US\$66) for everyone as compensation for higher prices.
- (vi) Automatic salary increases following any increases in prices or currency devaluation.
- (vii) Realistic steps toward leading the country out of crisis by informing the public fully about socio-economic situation, and making it possible for all classes and sections of the Polish community to discuss the program of reforms.
- (viii) Guarantee of freedom of expression in speech and print and the abolishment of censorship.
- (ix) Access by all religious groups to the mass media.
- (x) Reopening of all telephone and telex communications in the Gdansk area.
- (xi) Release of all political prisoners.
- (xii) Guarantee of the right to strike and security for all strikers.
- (xiii) Publicity over radio, television and in the newspapers of news about the strikes and the establishment of the strike committee.
- (xiv) Abolishment of administrative interference in trade union matters.
- (xv) Respect for the right to establish free trade unions.

These demands of the Polish workers showed that they did not enjoy even some of the basic needs which we take for granted. Many reasons could be offered for the sorry state of the Polish industrial and economic situation. I propose to look at some of these.

For example, the scarcity of meat, staple food, and consumer goods was a result of domestic production inefficiency, perhaps a characteristic of an over-centralised economy. Over 35 per cent of the population was involved in agriculture and this was considered as large by Western standards. Yet domestic production was inadequate to meet basic demands. In 1978, grain imports were six million tons. Last year it grew to 10 million tons. As a result of inadequate supply from domestic production the government had to resort to substantial imports for a large range of basic commodities.

The situation would have been manageable if there were sufficient exports to balance the trade. However, low productivity, poor marketability of Polish goods and obsolete industries hampered efforts to increase exports. Consequently the large amount of imports to meet domestic demand raised the inflation rate and widened the country's immense foreign debt. Efforts to modernise industries in order to make them more competitive were hindered by a lack of capital and policy direction. This in turn further aggravated their debt position as their exports could not earn enough foreign exchange to repay their loans. They were caught in a bind.

Their low productivity could be seen through some examples. Poland produced 200 million tons of steel a year but much of it was of low quality. The irony was that Poland had to import higher quality steel to meet their own demands.

The quality of the textile industry was also poor and so similarly were their manufactured electronics products. They were not competitive in the world market and hence the ability of these industries to expand and provide more job opportunities was limited.

There was of course the perennial problem of grey and black markets in times of shortage. This increased the frequency in which goods never reached the markets. However privileged groups of officials, cadres, party members and bureaucrats were immune to the shortages. Obviously left bearing the burden were the impoverished workers and their lot.

It would appear that the Polish workers had every reason to feel aggrieved. They were denied fundamental rights as workers,

unionists and citizens. They saw rising prices and falling economic production. They could feel that their productivity was low for a variety of reasons, not least of which was the lack of a systematic and conscious effort to motivate workers. They were fully aware that their products were uncompetitive in the international market place. Job security and employment opportunities were consequently poor. Yet the bureaucracy and the government appeared to be oblivious to the need for change and innovation. Or if they were aware, they seemed disinclined to want to do anything about improving the situation. This would not be strange.

In a communist system, the lack of motivation is pervasive. It affects the production worker as much as the chief economic planner. Workers on their own can do little to restructure the economy or to generate greater productivity or to motivate others to work harder. The only way is to reform the system and the Polish workers have decided to impose this on the leadership through dissent.

I do not wish to draw any conclusion from this outline for you. The brief facts speak loudly and clearly for themselves. The grievances of the Polish workers as listed earlier demonstrate clearly the reasons for dissent. It is not just a question of workers exercising a democratic right to choose an alternative approach to work or to unionise or to a better life. It was a question of survival for the Polish workers and their families.

We in Singapore live in an immensely different environment. We have progressed. Our workers have prospered. We elect our own leaders, whether it is in the unions or in the government. We take these things for granted and tend to forget those less fortunate than ourselves in these respects. Sometimes, we only read the headlines without understanding the reasons for the events which take place in some distant land. The important fact we must appreciate and understand is why we are not in a similarly parlous position but instead are much better off by comparison. The answer is stark but simple. We have decided that we shall not be led by anyone into such a dreadful position and are equally determined that we shall preserve at all cost our way of life in Singapore.

We have been successful in fending off defeat, unemployment, hunger and poverty because we recognise what our real goal is. Singaporeans are under no delusions about the constraints which we have to overcome to attain our goal of national progress and prosperity. We have achieved much not just because our plans are good and our planners are bright. Singapore has succeeded because we are clear in our minds how best to get to our goal with the greatest of certainty. We know it will not be the shortest route as short cuts often lead to dead ends. It will not be the smoothest route either as such routes only exist in a dreamer's imagination.

Our older workers have shown that they know what can and cannot be achieved. They are fully aware of the dangers and pitfalls which exist in the apparently softer and more attractive options offered by charlatans. Our task is to help our younger workers and members share in this understanding and appreciation. The NTUC's plans and programmes for the next few years, will have this aim as one of its objectives. I am confident that you, the delegates of FDMU, can help and succeed in this task.

As you confer and debate during your Biennial Delegates Conference, cast your mind back to the grievances of the Polish workers I listed out earlier. That reminder will give all of us greater courage and resolve to strive even harder to preserve what we have and to reach out for an even better tomorrow for ourselves and our families.

There is every reason for us to achieve our goals if we make the effort. We have succeeded in the past. We shall continue to succeed in the future.

May I in conclusion wish you all a very fruitful and successful conference.
