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**ADDRESS BY MR LIM CHEE ANN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO AND
SECRETARY-GENERAL, SINGAPORE NATIONAL TRADE UNION CONGRESS (SNTUC)
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE FIFTH ASIAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE
OF THE PUBLIC SERVICES INTERNATIONAL AT MARCO POLO HOTEL
ON TUESDAY, 14 OCTOBER 1980 AT 7.00 PM**

Let me on behalf of the Singapore National Trades Union Congress extend a warm welcome to all our distinguished fellow delegates attending the Fifth Asian Regional Conference of the Public Services International (PSI). Singapore is honoured to have been selected as the venue for this important Regional Conference of top Asian trade union leaders from the public services sector as well as eminent officials from the PSI. Since this is a gathering of distinguished unionists, workers and public servants, I have chosen to speak about trade unions and the public purpose. More precisely, I shall be examining the response unions can give in their dual roles of furthering the well-being of their members and contributing towards national development in the interest of all workers. In my mind, the two functions are inextricably linked.

Trade unionism is, as it always has been, the collective assertion that workers are human beings, with the right to be treated as such. Workers are much more than figures in statistical tables or digits in production schedules. Trade unions give workers the opportunity, through the strength of their solidarity, of reminding employers, managers and the government of this fact.

Individually, employees are no match for employers. An employer's ability to hire and fire, to promote and down-grade, to deploy labour, and to draw on a wide range of skills and resources, wider today than ever before, stacks the cards on his side. By reminding employers to recognise that

employees' interest /2.

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employees' interest and welfare must be taken into account if the enterprise or industry is to survive, prosper and expand, trade unions bring an element of democracy into the employment environment.

However this is not to say that every sector of the economy nor for that matter every establishment must be unionised in order to achieve this democratization. The presence of unions as an integral part of the economic framework will be sufficient to provide the buffer against the leviathan of modern industry. For example, the constant pressure of organised labour for a more humanised workplace will serve to remind the unorganised sector in the economy of its responsibilities in this regard. In other words, the benefits of unions extend beyond the unionised sector, and every worker stands to gain from what the unions stand for. Thus if they did not exist, trade unions would have to be invented if we were to get employers to treat all workers as humans rather than as faceless members of the labour force.

In an industrial democracy, trade unions can expect to be heard and to have their views taken into account, both at national as well as at plant level. However, it is necessary for trade unions to have a coherent and realistic definition of their social and economic objectives if they are to be taken seriously. It will not be surprising if no one listened to unions if their objectives are vague, responses are weak, and policies are narrow. For unions to be effective, unionists must make up their minds on how they perceive their role in the social and political milieu in which they operate. In this respect, the challenge to unions is whether they can see the link between trade unions and the public purpose, and whether they can evolve a positive union strategy for industrial relations, for industrial and economic policy, and for social policy. Superimposed against this challenge is of course the backdrop of the political environment in which unions have to operate. This raises another question which union leaders have to resolve even before they try to formulate an economic and social strategy, and that is the question of unions' involvement in politics.

I recognise that there is a view, not confined to the right of the political spectrum, that trade unions should not be involved in politics at all. Their role, it is argued, should be solely industrial. They should operate strictly as 'business' unions without any wider objectives, limiting their roles to the traditional functions for which they were set up. Such arguments, however, are based on a misunderstanding of trade unions' purpose and of the nature of the economic, social and political obstacles which prevent them from fulfilling their role.

Trade unions soon after their formation, usually had to act politically in order to create an environment which was favourable to trade unionism. This situation was not surprising since in many countries unions were grudgingly accepted. This was especially so when the countries were under colonial rule. Whenever unions raised their sights and tried to move away from being management's junior partner towards the more substantial role of democratising and humanising industry, attempts were made by the powers that be to stop them. Unions were thus forced into the political arena to protect themselves from their opponents or to secure changes in the industrial framework which would make it easier for them to fulfil their role.

This inclination to be involved politically is not diminished even after the colonialists have left and trade unions are firmly established in the newly independent state. This is because in such circumstances trade unions have to exercise a choice as to whether they want to participate in overcoming the most daunting problems faced by every developing country. If they do it is natural that they should want to be involved in the determination of national economic and social objectives. It is widely recognised that governments play the main role in determining the level of income, consumption, investments, and employment. It is no exaggeration to say that, in a modern economy, the jobs and living standards of workers will depend on the effectiveness or otherwise of government measures. Given the obvious implications of government policies for workers, it would be expected that trade unions

should want to have a say in policy-making and play a wider role.

The opponents of a wider role for trade unions ignore the fact that unions have to represent the needs and interests of their members in the broadest sense. Though their prime function is industrial representation, they have to take into account that workers are also consumers and citizens, parents and householders, and eventually old-age retired workers. So unions have not only to fight against deprivation and inequality at work, they have also to ensure social justice in the widest sense. Hence a trade union movement which confines its concern to industrial conditions alone will be falling down on the job. By the same token a union which behaves in such a manner as to ignore that its action or inaction can affect the rest of the community is being irresponsible.

The choice which most unionists face is how to go about pursuing the interest of their members most effectively in the political arena. Two approaches are generally available - direct action³ and legal action. There is an important distinction between the two.

Though there may sometimes be a case for a strong demonstration to drive home a point, there are overwhelming arguments against direct action to force the issue, such as a general strike, undertaken with the express purpose of forcing a democratically elected government either to drop legislation or to leave office altogether. Apart from its probable ineffectiveness, although there are few examples of successful political strikes, such conduct is fundamentally undemocratic. It also encourages unscrupulous persons to take such action to achieve narrow interests. The day of democracy may sometimes be slow but it ill behoves the proponents of a more democratic society to argue for unconstitutional short cuts.

The proper democratic behaviour is not direct action but political pressure, legitimately applied. Trade unionists are therefore right to continue to reject the blandishments of Marxists who seek to politicise them to overturn the system

undemocratically. To argue that unions should be involved in politics is quite different from saying that they should take over and run the country.

If unions are to be effective politically they must maintain a continuous dialogue with government. Trade unions are generally now involved in a whole range of official institutions. This has led to the development of a regular and wide-ranging process of consultation between the government and the union movement. In Singapore for example, the National Trades Union Congress is represented in 19 tripartite agencies and Statutory Boards.

In the eyes of some critics, trade union participation in outside institutions -- especially those set up by government -- amounts to little more than corporatism -- that is to say, a state of affairs in which trade union independence is fatally compromised by their involvement with the apparatus of the state. On the other hand there are others who maintain that governments, by involving unions in consultation, have given too much to trade unions. Despite this diversity of views, the opportunity for consultations enables a continual mutual shaping of views for the benefit of both parties. This is to be expected. Let me explain why.

Trade unions rightly believe that such subjects as economic planning, industrial policy, training and manpower questions and social issues are too important to be left just to governments and employers. The viewpoint of employees can only be fully taken into account if unions are also consulted in the determination of policy. On the other hand, any government which wishes to remain in power or to attain power cannot afford not to understand the legitimate rights and reasonable demands of workers. Consultations are clearly mutually beneficial.

However, if unions are to succeed in rebutting the charge of corporatism, they have to show results from their participation in the political process. In doing this ordering of priorities an appreciation of realities are essential.

The unions' primary job is to articulate the aspirations of their members. Thus they cannot support for any length of time policies which their members reject. But a close attention to the needs of the membership should not imply that the task of union leaders is merely to put forward a series of unco-ordinated and unrealistic demands.

No industrial society possesses such a super-abundance of resources that choices about their allocation do not have to be made. Even in a fast growing economy, it is just not possible to achieve dramatic increases in spending on houses, schools, hospitals and increases in real wages all at the same time. It is obvious that in any society it is not possible to satisfy all society's needs simultaneously. There is always scope for the reallocation of resources away from one type of expenditure towards another. It is a question of priority. We should also avoid the mistake of believing that natural wealth or transitory favourable conditions can provide a bottomless pool of wealth from which extra resources can be readily raised to meet everyone's demands. Even a mountain of uranium ore will not be adequate to meet a small portion of such demands. It will be futile to try doing it and greater folly to give the impression that it can be done.

So while it is natural that union members will continue to put forward demands on all fronts, trade union leaders have the responsibility of pointing out that they cannot be satisfied all at once. Trade unionists may 'cry for the moon' but, if they are not to become entirely cynical, their leaders must point out the difficulties in getting the moon. In the long run, nothing undermines authority so completely as the failure to deliver. Trade union leaders who are prepared to point out realities often discover that their honesty and courage is rewarded. The 'Dutch auction' approach is, in the end, self defeating and should be abandoned once and for all in favour of a more far-sighted and clearly thought-out strategy.

There is an analogy here with collective bargaining. The initial demand is crucial. If it is pitched too high, it is laughed out of court; if too low, the subsequent agreement

may be overturned by the rank and file. A realistic posture backed by rational argument has far more chances of success. In a wider discussion with government, a trade union movement which has already defined its objective coherently and realistically has a clear advantage and will be more convincing.

The crux of the matter is that union leaders have to keep ahead of their members in thinking about their problems. It is their responsibility to point out the further and more far-reaching consequences of decisions which, despite their strong immediate appeal, could be regretted later. When union leaders seek only to court popularity and defend their irresponsibility in acceding to wrong decisions on the grounds that they are the servants of their members, they betray the responsibilities of their office.

Obviously trade unions cannot reasonably behave as if they are not part of a larger society or ignore the effects of their policies on the national economy and the general public. No organisations can do this with impunity. If they do, they turn society against them, and society can retaliate. In fact, no elected government or community will be prepared to permit the unions progressively to alter the rules of the game if in pursuit of their objectives they encroach on the overall welfare of the whole community as a result.

The litmus test is whether unions and unionists possess a sense of belonging to their society and their nation, and recognise that they are co-contributors to and co-owners of society. If they do and understand that they all stand to gain from political, economic and social development, then trade unions have served the public purpose.

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