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WELCOME ADDRESS BY MR LIM CHEE ONN, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO
AND SECRETARY-GENERAL, NATIONAL TRADES UNION CONGRESS
AT THE NTUC SEMINAR "TOWARDS WORK EXCELLENCE" AT THE SINGAPORE
CONFERENCE HALL ON THURSDAY, 30 APRIL '81 AT 9.15 AM

Traditionally a welcome address should be short and simple. However, this morning I wish to deviate slightly from tradition for a very special reason.

Let me start by saying that we are very glad and privileged to have the Minister for Trade and Industry, and Health, Comrade Goh Chok Tong, to deliver a keynote address at this seminar. His presence indicates that he has included the health of industrial relations in his portfolio, a most suitable addition to his responsibility of looking after our economy's health.

For the first time in recent years or possibly even in the history of the union movement in Singapore, the NTUC has invited managements and their representatives to participate actively in one of our May Day activities. This is quite unlike the past when employers were merely passive audiences in union seminars, sometimes squirming in their seats and feeling hot under their collars during such proceedings when union leaders took the occasional swipe at them for some unsavoury acts of omission or commission. I must hasten to add that the tables were sometimes turned when unionists were invited to seminars and conventions organised by employers' organisations.

Today's seminar on the topic "Towards Work Excellence" has a somewhat different and indeed a distinct flavour in that the presentation and discussions will be led by a team comprising management staff, unionists and workers, and

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officials from government institutions - a truly tripartite effort. There are 161 companies with a total of over 800 employers, management personnel, junior executive staff, production workers and unionists registered for this seminar. This is quite a gathering by any standard.

Inevitably, there will be different reactions to this unique occasion which is a watershed in union-management relationship. Some unionists may wonder, "Is the NTUC going soft by inviting employers to share the May Day celebration platform with workers, for after all May Day is the most sacred day in the proletarian calendar?" On the other hand the more sceptical employers may ask one another "What is the catch in this display of goodwill by the unions? We better watch out for these unionists who always have something up their sleeves." On the government side, I would not like to hazard a guess as to what is going through their minds. We shall know in a moment when Comrade Goh Chok Tong makes his keynote address.

These thoughts of unionists and employers reflect the old order of industrial relations in our midst. Let me put to rest all these conjectures by outlining briefly the new order of employer-employee relationship which we are trying to build.

We have all heard about the New International Economic Order (NIEO) mooted some years ago in various international forums and about the North-South dialogues that have been held since then. Both these ideas were efforts aimed at improving world trade and economy, particularly in remedying the economic problems of impoverished third world countries.

For the past few years these North-South dialogues have been going on in various arenas; fiery speeches have been made by the most eloquent speakers, and allegations and counter accusations have been levied at one another ever so liberally by politicians, unionists and others around the globe. The net result is that only the airline and hotel industries benefitted considerably from this exercise of holding an unending stream of international forums and regional conventions

on this subject. Well at least someone benefitted from this whole masquerade ball where the traditional dance is known as going round in a circle or a variation on the same theme known as a three step movement - one step forward and two steps backwards. Unfortunately out of all this to-ing and fro-ing, the impoverished countries remained impoverished and unemployed workers are still unemployed.

The moral of the NIEO and North-Smith dialogue exercise is really quite simple: if in the pursuit of an objective we did nothing else except to talk about software and hardware, we end up going nowhere. The NTUC has decided that instead of getting involved in such a fantango, we as a people should make up our minds and commit ourselves to proceed in one direction, forward.

Hence the NTUC's efforts have been directed at getting unions and managements committed to promoting joint consultations and improving employer-employee relationship so as to establish at all levels in the company a climate of industrial relations which will encourage workers to develop the qualities of team spirit, good work attitudes, willingness to learn and excel, loyalty, and pride in performance.

These qualities are universal in character and are not the preserve of any one workforce. Nonetheless we have seen the success Japanese managements have in inculcating in Japanese workers these qualities through a conscious effort of working with their unions and employees. What we are trying to do is extract the essence of their systematic process of employers and employees pursuing a common goal as a team irrespective of rank and as a labour force irrespective of station.

Ultimately, our aim is to develop a disciplined and skilled workforce, be they managers or production workers, by culling from the best experiences around the world. There will be no danger of Singaporean workers having to don on Kimonos, Texan ten-gallon hats or pin-stripped trousers. We are Singaporeans and we shall remain Singaporeans.

This effort to enlarge the areas of manager-worker consultation and joint responsibility starting at the shop floor requires mutual trust and confidence to succeed. This is the rationale behind NIFUC's invitation to top executives of a few companies to establish Work Excellence Committees. To date 23 establishments have agreed to proceed in this way, forming joint employer-employee committees to build up the rapport and relationship between workers and management. Having laid this foundation managements and workers can thereafter build on it to achieve greater heights of worker and company performance.

We are pursuing this relentlessly because we have seen this form of cooperation succeeding in bringing a higher standard of living to workers, employers and the nation as a whole in countries where team spirit is part of the national work ethics. The prime example is of course Japan.

The watershed in industrial relations which I mentioned earlier can be considered as Singapore's New Industrial Relations Order (NIRO) which will help us to attain an even better quality of life. We must not allow the employer-employee dialogue to stagnate and become an exercise in futility like the North-South dialogue. We cannot afford to falter as our very survival is at stake. If we put in all our efforts to create the new industrial relations climate we seek, then we can make it. I am indeed confident that as a people working together we shall make it.