TRANSCRIPT OF A SPEECH GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER,
MR. LEE KUAN YEW, AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE
ON 1ST MAY, 1965.

MAY DAY RALLY

Friends and fellow workers,

It is not often that we get an opportunity as today to remind ourselves of the bigger problems around us, not just getting unions, together, getting more wages or better conditions of living, but more important, ensuring our future, because if the future is gone, all your agreements, all your fringe benefits, all your wages, if the economic stability is not there, economic development is not there, because the political stability is not there, then all is lost.

National Archives of Singapore

And you know, we must not forget, all the time, what is the alternative. And I think the pro-Communist union leaders, in a way, are doing a service to the rest of Malaysia in reminding people what is the alternative; the alternative to fair-play and accommodation within Malaysia. And that alternative spells violence, force and the supremacy of one group and one ideology over all others which must mean the complete integration and the destruction of the tolerant, multi-racial society that we now have.

You see, it reminded people that, after one and a half years, you know, of pretty tough talk particularly over the last few months, you cannot cover a whole population. And the problems of Malaysia cannot be resolved by force; they must be resolved peacefully, democratically, a process of adjustment and accommodation: slow, gradual, as people begin to realise what is the common media; what is the common mean, the average which will give the maximum benefit to the maximum number of people regardless of race, religion and language. You try and enforce the advantage of one group, whether the group is based on ideology or on race or on language, then I say the whole basis of the prosperity and well-being of Malaysia will collapse; crack and collapse.

Just imagine what could happen if today, you know, it is not just a few Communist lunatics in the midst of troubles with Indonesia, troops being deployed elsewhere ... yet they wanting to demonstrate their strength, God knows for what hidden reasons apart from the one of showing that they are not cowed, that they will fight ... which is a good thing. ... I like people who will stand up for what they believe in; for right, for justice, for fair-play. And I believe if it came to the push, the NTUC won't be lacking in that courage to lead the workers forward.

National Archives of Singapore

But it is a solitary thought to think what would happen to this country if everybody decided to go on the march. Not possible. This is what has happened in Vietnam: people have decided that they have got nothing to lose; so they decided to go on the march. And the South Vietnamese soldier is no longer fighting. This is the whole problem of South Veitnam. They have opted out. So the Americans have to fight, which is the biggest tragedy of Southeast Asia: that a Southeast Asian people is not prepared to fight for that kind of society; a society where military dictators and civilian dictators like Ngo Dinh Diem were able to squat on the people. They talked democracy and so on while they hid the their bags of gold ready to fly out of the country. And if that happens in Malaysia, we'll say, that is the end; can't last very long.

So I take heart, and I say you have reasons to take heart: that because it cannot be resolved by the use of force, people will soon have to learn that they must adjust and accommodate. And we hope that, you know, the time they take to learn will be as short as possible. And it is helpful if, from time to time, not only politicians, political leaders but also trade union leaders and other civic leaders generally, remind everybody of the will and the verve of a people to seek their just right as self-respecting human being in the new nation we have created.

National Archives of Singapore

It is natural that trade unions should want to concentrate on the rights of their members. I mean, it happens in every organisations: the first interest is the interest of the members of the community for which you are responsible. So trade unionists look after the interests of their members. So, I am compelled to look after the interests of the citizens of Singapore as I explained to you.

Last year, 10,000 people came from the rest of Malaysia into Singapore. Net gain of migration from Singapore to the other territories and from the other territories into Singapore: 10,000 people came here; all young men looking for jobs. So, I was forced, very reluctantly, forced by the pressures of my immediate responsibility to give a directive to all Government departments, to all Statutory Boards: before employing, make sure prority to Singapore citizens, after that, to Malaysian citizens.

National Archives of Singapore

But at the same time, I knew, in may heart, that this cannot he for all time; it is wrong, it is shortsighted; it is narrow because if the rest of Malaysia cannot enjoy, cannot feel that they are going to enjoy the same prosperity like Singapore, then you don't expect the rest of Malaysia just to be your consumers, to buy your goods; it is no possible. Why should they buy Bridgestone tyres? Why should they buy Metal Box tins which can their fruits when they can't share

in this? I mean, if you want Malaysia to succeed, then everybody must have a share in this, and I concede that in the long run that must be so.

Even from our narrow interests of safeguarding the special high standards in Singapore, it is still necessary for us to ensure that the rest of Malaysia develops. And so I suggest even your own trade union movement, it is in your interest to ensure that Federation of Malaya unions have got high standards. Otherwise, they come down here and undercut you.

You know what is happening. The contract labourers today: if they get from Singapore, they got to pay them $3, $3.50. People are coming down from Johore prepared to work for $1.50, $2.00. You know that, isn't it? So it is in your interest to ensure that the MTUC strengthens its hands. Because if they push standards up there, then your own interests here are safeguarded. So, you see, you got to take a slightly broader view in order to protect even your immediate interests.

National Archives of Singapore

Now I give you a simple illustration. You know, what has Australia to do with South Vietnam and Malaysia? A long way, you know. If, in fact, they are just stopping this place from going Communist, stopping Communist aggression ... But they are deeper thinkers, you know. They have calculated. It is not just

stopping Communists; it is having a stake in the wider defence implications of their own world. If they want the Americans to come and help them later on when they get into trouble, as they may one day get into trouble if 100 million Indonesians suddenly get hold of modern weapons and begin to march southwards, then they must be prepared to help the Americans when the Americans have got a bit of trouble on their hands; isn't? So one battalion has gone to South Vietnam. What for? To protect South Vietnam? Yes, up to a point; but I say the main motivation is to protect the prosperity and the future and the security of the Australians; the workers who enjoy one of the highest standards of living in this part of the world. That's why they have gone there.

That's why to protect your own interests, you've got to see just beyond Singapore; just beyond your own members first; for all the citizens of Singapore first. That's most important because if you get the employed sector earning more and more, and the unemployed sector becoming larger and larger, your interests cannot last long. You will get under-cutting, black-legging; your trade union system will collapse. So your first duty is to spread the employment in your own interests to prevent under-cutting, black-leg non-union stuff. Then, help organisations outside Singapore: Sabah, Sarawak, Malaya; boost their standards of living; increase their bargaining capacity, help them in your own interests; and see beyond Malaysia.

National Archives of Singapore

Do you believe people will open factories costing millions of dollars, tens and hundreds of millions of dollars ... Some of the big steel factories that can be built -- some people are planning, you know, some Australians are planning, 50-million dollare steel mill -- investments which will take them 10, 15, 20 years to get back: do you think they will build that if they think that Malaysia will collapse either because internal pressures or external aggression? They want to be sure that there is a future, that they can calculate in terms of amortization of writing off the assets over 15, 20, 30 years. Then they come, and when they come, then we flourish. Because you can't flourish just by planting rubber and topica. You have got to modernise; build up skills, build up your industries; then you give the people the kind of life they want.

As I said, you know, ten years ago ... the Australian trade union people told me this -- Mr. Monk, who has extended an invitation to your NTUC, is the head of the Australian Confederation of Trade Unions -- he told me this: ten years ago, they were negotiating for a particular factory for places to put bicycles for their workers. Today, the car park, the managers have no places for their cars, and the bicycle stands are empty.

National Archives of Singapore

Now if you want to do that, we must think. Necessary for you to organise your chaps; your little group whatever it is: Metal Box trade, the Singapore Traction Company, Green Bus, Manual and Mercantile, Mansfield branch or whatever it is. But your leaders must be able to see beyond that: first Singapore as a whole; then Singapore as a whole wanting to survive; Malaysia as a whole, and that having been said, Malaysia as a whole, how do you survive? You must have friends: allies who are prepared to come and fight and help you survive separately, because you have got bigger neighbours. Indonesia, ten to one in numbers; 40 : 1 in fighting power. We've got to have friends; British, Australians, New Zealanders.

But these are European powers. Some Afro-Asians may not understand what we are doing; hence we must have Afro-Asia sympathetic, understanding: what is our problem, why we are doing these things. Then we can survive.

National Archives of Singapore

You see, you must understand this: the nexus. Devan Nair is off to Accra, on the 6th, in Ghana. I am off myself to Bombay on the 6th. There is a reason behind all this. It is connected with your survival and mine because, for Malaysia to survive, we must have these friends; for the trade union movement to survive, you must have friends.

Let us suppose one night, Mr. Jek went home and had a nightmare. Next day, he woke up, anti-labour. Let us just imagine that; and he starts talking forcibly, threatening you. Now, suppose you had many friends throughout the world, you see: Australian trade union, British trade union, New Zealand trade union, Ghanaian trade union, Kenya trade union, Indian trade union, Burmese trade union; and you get cables and demonstrations taking place outside the Malaysian Embassy saying: "What are you doing to your workers?". Mr. Jek will go home; he will get another nightmare and next day, he will wake up preaching love and human kindness to the workers. You see? This is necessary. (APPLAUSE)

Of course, they don't like me to make friends; nor do they like Devan Nair to make friends; because the more friends we have, the bigger the price they have to pay for any stupidity; and our job is to make them pay such a price that it means the end for them if they do something foolish. (APPLAUSE). This is our duty to do; and your duty is to let them understand very quickly: this is not a people that can be cowed; can't be; and if we all decided that there is no other way than to show strength, then we will; but we hope it never comes to that. We want to live peacefully; we like to be friends; we like to be always talking reasonably.

National Archives of Singapore

So, I hope, together with growing power of the NTUC, there will also be a growing realisation of the responsibilities of trade union leadership here. You have got the power. You can really, if you want to embarrass the Government, embarrass the whole economic system, all the bosses, to a point of near collapse.

Today, within these constitutional mechanics, without invoking emergency regulations and so on, the NTUC has got an apparatus within your trade union laws and your trade union agreements to really bring Singapore to a halt. You know, you can start off with the banks going slow, no overtime; insurance companies; that slows down all the business. Harbour Board can go slow; that will slow down the whole import-export; brokers will be running around; cinema operators will get worried because workers not earning enough money won't be going to the cinema; so the whole thing can be brought down. But with that power comes responsibility; because, if you do that without calculating the consequences, you may be doing grevious harm to your own members and worse to the children of your members, because if no economic development takes place, where are your high wages?

National Archives of Singapore

You know, as I have said, it is not without significance that when the Labour Party of Britain took office just over six months ago, one of the strongest trade unionist, Mr. Frank Cousins, was appointed Minister for Technology. What is the nexus? What is the connection? Because he is the man who can

have the strength to tell the unions and the workers why industry must modernise if they want more pay, better standards of life: thinking ahead. Now they have got the power; they can do whatever they like. They can say, ""Look, don't change, employ two workers on an old machine rather then have an automatic machine." You know, if we are not careful, that may happen to us here because I was at the printing industry convention. And they were telling me, you know, that they have this "offset" press. It seems that all the big companies now they have got an "offset" press; they photostat, they can print all their pamphlets and their advertising literature. No need for employing workers or printing; just one photo engraving, and the thing just rolls off 50,000 copies. Now, we can just pass a law and cay, "No 'offset' press, please send to the printers." But is that the way you get your car and your house? By lowering your productivity, or by increasing your productivity, and insisting that with higher productivity comes higher dividends to the workers? You must calculate that, isn't it?

National Archives of Singapore

British industry is in a jam; their export market has fallen; their machines are out of date as compared with Germans, Americans. Because their exports have fallen, so they have no foreign exchange to pay for their imports, and they are consuming a lot. So the pound, their money, was going to be devalued and was going to collapse; and they had to borrow three billion dollars, American

dollars; three billion, just to tide them over six months, to prevent the pound being devalued. And what is the long-term answer? To increase productivity. Modern machines, more results per man, more exports to pay for their imports.

So, a trade unionist takes over the Ministry for Technology. That's quite right: because that's what he must do if he wants his trade unions to enjoy ever-rising standards of life. And this is our problem, too.

And I hope, with every passing May Day, you get this realisation spreading among all union committee members down to your union members. By all means, your immediate interests your particular branch, your particular union. Then, to ensure that, Singapore: trade union movement as a whole. To ensure that, Singapore's economic, political and social development as a whole; to guarantee that, Malaysia's commensurate economic and social development, and to secure Malaysia friends and allies across the world, not just Britain, Australia and New Zealand but India, Ceylon, Burma, Pakistan, Cambodia, Thailand, the new nations of Africa, who will understand and help. Through their very sympathy, they create a climate which makes it possible for us to survive.

National Archives of Singapore

If the Indonesians had succeeded in passing resolutions at the Bandung Conference, 10th anniversary, condemning us, you know, there'll be much more fears than what there are now. But they failed, isn't it? Nobody joined them in condemning Malaysia. So they have to go slow because they felt isolated; and if they went on alone and they got walloped back, there'll be no sympathy for them. So they know that.

So you see, all these things are inter-related; and leadership, whether it is of political parties or political movements or trade union movement, must understand the implications of the wider whole: only then in we survive.

And I hope you will set the pace to bring about this transformation from just the sectarian approach of the trade unions to the wider approach of all workers in Malaysia to a coordination of effort within Malaysia, and co-operation outside to secure our base in Malaysia.

National Archives of Singapore

Thank you.