TRANSCRIPT OF A SPEECH BY MINISTER MENTOR LEE KUAN YEW AT NTUC'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER 2011 AT MARINA BAY SANDS GRAND BALLROOM ON FRIDAY, 13 MAY 2011

President of the NTUC, John De Payva, Members of the various trade unions, Brothers and Sisters, and Distinguished Visitors from abroad. It is difficult, if you have not lived through as I have over the last fifty years, to imagine the rollercoaster ride we had in the first fifteen years, without which we would never have got here. Many people tonight I have seen with faces I remember, without whose valiant efforts and their contribution to the role, we would never had the kind of peaceful industrial cooperation - not just good relations but cooperation - between workers, employers and the government and I would like to explain briefly how that came about. It is a remarkable story because nobody, no other country has achieved this, where we brought the labour union into the collective decision-making process and ensured that they got their fair share of what the economy produces.

I began my political life by representing trade unions. I was a young legal assistant at the firm of Laycock & Ong, and the postmen were about to go on strike. I was asked to look after them. They never imagined what would happen. They thought I'd be a lawyer and there'll be some arguments with the bosses and that would be the end of the matter. But they went on strike and for two weeks, the union ding-donged in the press against the Commissioner for Posts representing the Colonial government on the merits of their case. I drafted their statements and swung public sentiments towards the unions, and the Colonial government had to give way with higher wages, better terms and conditions of service, and amongst other ridiculous things, the removal of thick printed red stripes on their trousers making them look like circus attendants. It's because they didn't want the postmen to use these trousers during off-duty. Because of this success, I was briefed by the Clerical Union of Post & Telegraphs for their demands and that went to arbitration and the union won.

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Consequently, I became adviser to innumerable trade unions: English-speaking, Chinese-speaking and Malay-speaking. When I fought my first election in 1955, I chose Tanjong Pagar because that was where the postmen were based, their quarters were and also where the dock workers were, whom I represented. So, I won easily.

I have maintained my relationship with the unions and, as Prime Minister, I have always been mindful of the interests of the workers and their unions - many of whose faces I have seen tonight, whose names, some I remember but some, my memory has to be jolted. But sitting beside me is Oscar Olivero and Mahmud Awang and I can see Eric Chong there and they were part of this transformation. Together, we developed a tripartite relationship, and we had the National Wages Council with the advice of Dr Albert Winsemius, a Dutch Adviser the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] sent to help us. On his own, he came back every year, year after year because he approved of, and was attracted by our practical approach to problems.

Today, I am happy to join you in celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the NTUC. Those of you who were alive in the 1950s would remember that the NTUC nearly lost to SATU, Singapore Association of Trade Unions, led then by communist lefties. They were mainly the Chinese-speaking unions. Fortunately, they lost, or the history of Singapore would have been for the worse.

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In government, I have never forgotten that it is in the interest of the workers and their unions that we must strive for growth and development. In other words, growth is meaningless unless it is shared by the workers, and shared not only directly in wage increases but indirectly in better homes, better schools, better hospitals, better playing fields; a healthier environment for their families and for their children to grow up. I am glad that since I stood down as

Prime Minister in 1990, successive Prime Ministers, first Goh Chok Tong, now Lee Hsien Loong, both carried out the same policies: pro-worker, pro-trade unions. We changed the attitude of antagonism by employees towards their employers to one of fair bargaining where the account books of the employers, if necessary, are open for inspection by the Arbitration Court. This led to cooperation in the National Wages Council with the government, the unions and the employers. This is a unique system which has served us well. It has stopped unions from being adversaries to squeeze employers out of business. Instead, they have become part of a team with the government and the employers in a tripartite system which has brought benefits to all: workers, employers and government because industrial peace creates confidence and confidence increases investment – both our own and foreign.

From the early 1980s, we put trade union leaders on key statutory boards so that they will understand and shape the policies of these boards. This is especially valuable for our public organisations to have the voice of the unionists on public policies. They were our channels for feedback and helped to refine our policies. It also made union leaders take ownership of these policies, so that they mobilised their fellow unionists and their workers to make these policies successful. Since 1980, unionists also played a key role in the productivity movement. They decided that the objective should be enlarging the pie rather than fight for a bigger slice of a small pie.

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The most significant transformation of the trade union movement was the Modernisation Seminar in 1969. It was proposed by the late Deputy Prime Minister Dr Goh Keng Swee and the late President Devan Nair, then Secretary-General of the NTUC, jointly organised it. That Modernisation Seminar extended the activities of the unions to embrace the economic, social and recreational life of the workers. NTUC set up co-operatives. The first was NTUC Income, offering low-wage workers affordable insurance. Then NTUC Comfort, enabling unlicensed taxi drivers to become owners of taxis and get a decent living. In

1973, NTUC Welcome, now known as NTUC FairPrice, put a cap on private sector businesses as to how high they can mark up their prices. Other cooperatives were subsequently set up: NTUC Childcare, Choice Homes, Eldercare, Foodfare, Healthcare, Media and Thrift & Loan. Trade union leaders were in charge of running these cooperatives. This gave NTUC leaders personal experience as managers, so that they better understood the problems of management. Because they were co-operatives, their prices were lower than that of the ordinary businesses and helped workers to save money.

Our trade union leaders and their members have become agents of change. Unlike the old British and European trade unions, they accepted new technology and new ways of working. They helped workers overcome the risk of unemployment due to the increasing use of computers and other new technologies. Together with the government, they set up computer appreciation classes for the workers. As a result, workers did not fear becoming redundant because of computers or have their pay reduced. Instead, the training in the use of computers helped workers increase their productivity and their wages. Together with the government, the unions also set up BEST classes to improve the command of the English language of our workers and today the English language is the common language and working language of Singapore, uniting all our people, making it easier for leaders to talk at one time and be understood by everybody. And so there'll be the 1960s and 70s, where every speech I made, as you can see from the old films, were made in several languages, Malay, Hokkien, English and even some words of Tamil like "Vanakkam". They ran a range of courses to give the workers different skills.

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I am honoured to be your Guest-of-Honour this evening. We all remember the close relationships between the NTUC, the trade unions, the PAP and the government.

I wish you more years of active work, especially the younger trade union leaders who have taken over and hope that you will work with the government and the employers on equal terms. You have helped to create jobs and upgrade skills so that our workers will enjoy a better standard of living and a quality of life. You have done so for the last 50 years and there's no reason why we cannot do so for the next 50 years. The NTUC challenge now is to keep up with the fast pace of economic transformation. Through technology at a fast rate, this new technology introduces new lifestyles, new ways of communication, opens up people's horizons, and therefore change becomes faster and faster. And you have to help our young workers, including the old workers, professionals and rank-and-file - to secure better jobs, better pay and live a better life for many more years to come.

Finally, Happy 50th Anniversary, NTUC. Thank you.

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