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**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR LABOUR, MR LEE YOCK SUAN,
AT THE OPENING OF THE SHIPYARD SAFETY CONVENTION ORGANISED
BY THE SINGAPORE ASSOCIATION OF SHIPBUILDERS AND REPAIRERS
AT THE REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE ON FRIDAY
20 NOVEMBER 1987 AT 9.30 AM**

The shipbuilding and repairing industry is a major industry in Singapore. At its peak in 1982, the industry grossed more than \$2.2 billion in revenue. After years of rapid growth, it went through three difficult years of recession from 1983 to 1985. Gross revenue reached a trough of about \$650 million in 1985.

Since then, with various cost-cutting measures and as a result of currency realignments, the industry has recovered from the recession. Last year, turnover was \$720 m. It is likely to reach \$800 m this year. It provides employment to 14,000 workers, most of whom are males, in contrast to the rapidly expanding industries like electronics which require mostly female workers. The shiprepairing industry is likely to continue playing a significant role in our economy in future because of our strategic location and excellent infrastructure.

IMPROVEMENTS IN SAFETY AND HEALTH

Apart from cost competitiveness, the success of the industry depends on maintaining the highest standards of safety. Otherwise the image of the industry suffers and it will have difficulty attracting not only workers but also customers.

The industry was unfortunate to have experienced a number of serious accidents during its short history, the worst of which was the tragic accident on board the vessel "Spyros" in 1978. However, our shipyards have learnt from these painful lessons. With the assistance of the unions and the government, they have implemented the necessary safety measures to improve safety and prevent similar disasters. I understand that some of these, particularly in the area of fire and explosion prevention, are among the most stringent in the world.

The shipbuilding and repairing industry has also set the pace in safety training. It was the first in Singapore to introduce compulsory safety orientation courses for all who work in shipyards, including managers, supervisors and sub-contractors' workers.

The industry has also responded positively to my Ministry's efforts to promote self-regulation amongst factories in the area of safety. It has taken the initiative in promoting safety and health in shipyards. Safety committees in shipyards are amongst the most active and effective in Singapore. More importantly, line managers, supervisors and workers have begun to see that safety is their responsibility, not just that of the safety department. That is half the battle won.

ATTRACTING MORE LOCAL WORKERS

Another way to improve the safety performance of shipyards is to attract more local workers and retain skilled foreign workers to build up a permanent and reliable workforce. Local shipyard workers have been found statistically to be less prone to accidents than foreign workers. Permanent local workers are more familiar with the working environment and the necessary safety measures than temporary guestworkers. Local workers are also more likely to build up pride and loyalty towards the company.

Our shipyards should try to attract some of the local construction workers who lost their jobs during the recession. The construction industry has shed about 14,000 local workers since 1985. These workers are used to working in environments similar to those in shipyards although they will have to be retrained. There are also about 2,000 unemployed Singaporeans who were previously working in shipyards.

Greater Vigilance

The industry's efforts to promote safety and health augur well for the future. I would, however, like to inject a note of caution here. Shipyards must be unrelenting in their efforts and continuously vigilant. The nature of shipyard work is such it takes only one fault in a safety control system to result in a major disaster. There is no room for complacency.

Already, because of increased activities, industrial accidents in shipyards have begun to rise over this year. After five years of continuous decline, the number of shipyard accidents reported to the Department of Industrial Safety for the first 10 months of 1987 has risen to 553 from 418 for the corresponding period last year. The accident frequency rate has increased to 14 accidents per million man hours from 13.2 last year. The number of fatal accidents has, however, fallen from 10 cases for the first 10 months of last year to six cases in the same period this year.

We need to press on for greater improvement, higher standards and safer practices. More can, and should, be done. SASAR could, for example, consider forming technical committees with experienced engineers and other personnel from various shipyards to improve on the safety of individual work processes and equipment. These could

include grit blasting and the safe use of cranes and scaffolding. The industry should also examine ways to increase automation and mechanisation in shipyards. This will not only improve safety but also productivity.

Now it is my pleasure to declare open this Shipyard Safety Convention.

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