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SPEECH BY THE MINISTER FOR LABOUR, MR ONG PANG BOON, AT  
THE ANNUAL DINNER OF THE SINGAPORE EMPLOYERS' FEDERATION  
AT THE ISLAND BALLROOM, SHANGRI-LA HOTEL ON THURSDAY  
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The 70's is fast drawing to a close. In a few months we move into the 80's. It is timely for us to take stock of the industrial relations situation in the 70's and to see what action we will need to take for the 80's.

The industrial relations situation in the 70's was comparatively peaceful. For the period 1970 to Sep 79 there were 44 work stoppages with a loss of 42,928 man-days lost. This is a marked improvement over the 393 work stoppages involving a loss of 1,303,988 man-days during the period 1960-69.

This stable industrial relations was possible because the Government, unions and employers accepted economic development as a tripartite effort and responsibility in which each must play his respective role. The Government pursued correct economic development policies and enacted labour laws to lay down the minimum labour standards and the framework for the democratic and quick resolution of labour disputes in a system of collective bargaining, conciliation and arbitration. The workers and the unions realised that national economic policies were designed for their own good. They accepted the enactment of those labour laws, followed a policy of wage restraint from 1968-71 and agreed to participate in the National Wages Council from 1972 to ensure orderly wage increases. Employers contributed by not abusing the management prerogatives which were rendered by law non-negotiable. They did not exploit labour but were prepared to share some of the benefits of their profits with their workers.

This tripartite partnership in economic development must continue in the 80's. Each of us, whether Government, unions or employers, will

have to review own position and see what changes we have to make in order that we can continue to have industrial peace with justice in the 80's.

The Labour Ministry has been examining in what ways it can improve its contribution to industrial relations in the next decade. The present foundation and framework of our industrial relations lie in the Employment Act, the Industrial Relations Act and the Trade Unions Act which have been in operation for some time. These labour laws are being reviewed to ensure that they meet the needs of the future. In this review, recognition will be given to the need to continue to attract investment to ensure our continued growth. The shortcomings experienced in the administration of these labour laws will be rectified. New needs such as provisions for part-time employment for women workers in the light of the decreasing workforce in the 80's arising from our successful family planning programme in the past will be taken into account.

The Labour Ministry provides conciliation and preventive mediation services to help solve labour disputes. Programmes have been introduced to develop a more alert, positive and informed industrial relations service. A departmental Labour Service was established in October 77 to build up a corps of experienced and competent labour officers. A programme to train a pool of conciliation officers has begun and will continue into the 80's. Eventually the Ministry will always have a pool of trained conciliation officers over and above the complement of conciliation officers in the Conciliation Section. The Labour Ministry aims to develop conciliation officers who not only have conciliation skills but also knowledge of labour laws and practices in important industries. To this end, conciliation officers will be given on-the-job training as well as exposure to local and overseas industrial relations practice. Those with potential will be sent for overseas training in various aspects of labour relations. A programme to provide conciliation officers with information on labour practices in important industries has been launched. Eventually conciliation officers will specialise in certain important industries.

Our trade unions are already preparing to meet the industrial changes of the 80's. The NTUC is holding a seminar in early November this year to review the progress made by unions since the 1969 modernisation seminar and to chart a course for the labour movement for the 80's. The labour blueprint is expected to cover industrial relations, development

of workers' skills, occupational safety and health, productivity and union organisation, economic enterprises and investments. Plans are being developed for the training of industrial relations officers and union leaders to enable them to meet the needs of the next decade. This together with the infusion of scholars will mean that the trade union movement will be staffed and led by academically higher qualified personnel.

I note with interest that the Singapore Employers' Federation (SEF) is hosting from 8-12 Oct 79 the 3rd ILO Regional Technical Seminar for employers' organisations in Asia and the Pacific which is discussing services provided by employers' organisations with specific reference to wages, productivity and research. I hope that the SEF as well as the National Employers' Council (NEC) will also be reviewing what role employers and their organisations can play in the decade ahead.

In this regard I have two observations to make for their consideration. First, the continued ready availability of jobs and a better educated workforce will mean that workers will be less tolerant of bad personnel management. With good physical work conditions assured in the form of modern factories, workers will look increasingly to improvements in other aspects of the work environment like good relations with peers or supervisors, job satisfaction, recognition and career development. Good personnel management will become more important. Employers who do not realise this will have to give proper emphasis to personnel management, work out a personnel management policy, establish and staff an effective personnel department and provide training to supervisors, personnel officers and other members of their staff who deal with workers. Both the SEF and the NEC might want to look into how they can assist employers in improving their personnel management.

The other area relates to the part to be played by the SEF and the NEC. Although the SEF is the largest trade union of employers in Singapore, it has, however, a membership of only 811 companies employing a total number of some 133,000 workers. The other major trade union of employers, the NEC, on the other hand, has a total membership of 226 companies employing a total of about 65,000 workers. The two organisations share the same aims and objectives but operate independently of each other.

Since both bodies exist for the same purpose, it would not be inappropriate to suggest that the leaders in the SEF and the NEC give their serious consideration to bringing the two organisations together,

perhaps a merger of the two. There is no sufficient or fundamental interest differentiation between the membership of the two organisations to justify having two bodies representing employers' interest in labour matters.

There are benefits to be gained by the merger. A single employers' union will mean that there is an organisation whose views can be taken to be representative of those of employers. The Government will then have a body to consult if it is seeking the views of employers on labour matters. Furthermore, with an enlarged membership, the financial position too will be strengthened. Chances of retaining experienced and capable persons in the secretariat able to advise employers on industrial relations matters and yet command the respect of the unions and the Ministry of Labour will be better with improved prospects as a result of a bigger organisation. Better industrial relations services can be provided and new activities in other labour areas like industrial safety and health can be undertaken.

As we face the 80's there is room for optimism although the journey ahead will not be entirely smooth. However, I am confident that the collective and concerted efforts of our tripartite partnership will once again pull us through.

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