

30 MAY 1986

PRESS RELEASE

Information Division, Ministry of Communications & Information, City Hall, Singapore 0617 • Tel. 3307269 / 3307270 / 3307271

86-07C-6

Release No.: 43/APR
16-0/86/04/30

SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, SECOND DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER,
AT THE NTUC'S 25TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER
AT THE MANDARIN BALLROOM, MANDARIN HOTEL
ON WEDNESDAY, 30 APRIL 1986 AT 7.30 PM

Tonight we are gathered here together to celebrate a milestone in the history of NTUC.

In a more traditional society, 25 years may not seem to be a very long time, but for Singaporeans who have only a short history of 21 years since independence, a 25th birthday is a significant and grand occasion. It allows us the opportunity to reflect on our past achievements and to acknowledge and express our appreciation to many of our older union leaders and friends who have given the greater part of their working lives to bring us to where we are today. It is also a timely occasion for us to look into the future.

When NTUC was first established in 1961, it was a very different Singapore compared to what we see today. Right from the moment the NTUC sprang into existence, the NTUC was engaged in a life-and-death struggle with an opponent, who had all the advantage of experience and strength. The founders of the NTUC had a busy time taking on the opponent, so much so that they did not find the time to officially register the birth of the NTUC until some two years later.

The situation then was very tough. There was massive unemployment, frequent industrial strife and political upheavals which threatened our very existence.

It is now a matter of history who won this David-and-Goliath struggle in Singapore. I can assure you that the NTUC had won not because of a lucky sling-shot. We succeeded because we worked very hard, because we were very determined and persistent, because we were convinced that we had a just cause, and because we knew that time was on our side.

At stake at that time was the right to organise and represent the workers of Singapore. We founded the NTUC to reshape the trade union movement in Singapore into a social institution, whose basic concern is the well-being of the workers. If workers' well-being is best enhanced by co-operating with the Government and the employer to build a better Singapore for all Singaporeans, then the trade unions should be sensible and realistic enough to accept tripartite co-operation.

At the inaugural Delegates Conference of the NTUC in September 1961, a few trade unions indicated that they were prepared to commit themselves to such co-operation.

When the first Delegates Conference of the NTUC was held a year later in September 1962, the majority of the trade unions came round to the view that it was in the interest of their members to co-operate with the Government and the employers. Today, the trade unions affiliated to NTUC represent more than 95 per cent of the organised workers, and the NTUC is firmly committed to tripartite co-operation.

Over the past 25 years, our labour movement has done much to realise its primary objective of enhancing the social and economic status of workers and to protect their rights and interest. We also took part in nation building.

Our per capita GNP has risen 11 times over a period of 25 years from S\$1,300 in 1960 to S\$14,300 in 1985. We have transformed Singapore with a severe housing shortage and an unemployment rate of 13 per cent, 25 years ago, to a green, clean and affluent society. After the 1969 Modernisation Seminar, NTUC and its affiliates moved into the co-operative movement. Their pioneering efforts have blossomed into NTUC FairPrice, INCOME, DENTICARE and COMFORT. NTUC also negotiated on behalf of the workers on NWC since 1972, started child-care centres and later initiated the BEST programme.

The past 25 years have been a period of great changes and rapid growth for Singapore. The NTUC in symbiosis with the PAP has made a significant contribution to Singapore's progress. But we realise that no labour movement can work alone or in isolation to uplift the quality of life of workers.

The NTUC believes in tripartism because it is the best way to further the well-being of the workers. In opting for tripartite co-operation, the NTUC has taken upon itself a role that is sensible and constructive. But it is a role that may not appeal to some people, because it doesn't seem as colourful and exciting as the role carved out by militant trade unionists in some other countries. It is true that co-operative unions and workers are not newsworthy. Strikes and pickets make more exciting headlines.

But what is meat to the news media could be poison to the economy. A country that is well developed or is rich in natural resources can withstand the trauma of chaotic industrial relations. But, to a small country like Singapore without natural resources, the slightest cold or fever can become a fatal bout of pneumonia.

The NTUC and its affiliates have benefited throughout its history of 25 years from good and solid leadership. As a labour movement, we have gained wide recognition by workers for having a strong core of devoted and trusted union leaders who have over the years gained extensive experience and knowledge in industrial relations.

There is close and intimate contact within the labour movement. Because of these "family ties", NTUC stays in constant touch with union leaders and workers, understanding the pulses and feelings of the ground. Their close contacts enable them to be nimble and responsive to change.

NTUC officials and union leaders of the affiliates are willing and able to work the rigours and demanding pace of handling sensitive industrial relations problems. We have a strong voice in Parliament. We can influence decisions and alter the final shape of policy and legislation that affects workers' interest.

Notwithstanding this valuable strength that we have and our excellent achievements in the past, we must not be complacent. There is still much that needs to be done to improve our knowledge and performance with greater professionalism in all aspects of union work. We must equip ourselves professionally and organise institutionally to face the tough challenge ahead.

Because of the rapid technological changes and ever-increasing sophistication of industries, the need for trained manpower at all levels will continue to grow. NTUC and its affiliates will do their best to assist and work with the Government in their effort to provide intensive training to upgrade the skills of workers. Special emphasis will be paid to the training of workers who have missed out

on their basic education during the colonial days. We want workers to realise the importance of this "catch-up" training if they want to retain their jobs because the future demand for workers by employers will be towards the better educated and better trained workers as we move up the technological ladder.

We understand why employers have to embark on mechanisation and automation programmes for productivity increase as this is the only way for Singapore products to remain competitive. In order to enable us to maximise the use of capital-intensive machinery and equipment to produce goods at lower cost, we must have a better educated and better trained workforce. This is why, despite much higher wages, the Japanese are able to retain their competitive edge. With better skills, improved productivity and increased economic growth, our workers too will eventually enjoy a higher level of income like the Japanese workers.

The tasks and challenges ahead are not simple. There will be obstacles along the way. But our 25 years of collective experience and wisdom will help see us through.

Those who live and work in Singapore have always known that the basis for Singapore's prosperity is extremely fragile. We don't have the inherent advantage of size, population, or mineral wealth to give us the momentum of economic development nor the safety net for failure. We have to depend on our own continued hard work to maintain our progress. The present economic downturn warns us the danger of our ever becoming complacent.

The NTUC was founded 25 years ago to help workers in Singapore in making the right choice - whether to

enhance their well-being through national tripartite partnership or to stubbornly maintain their right to cut their own nose to spite their own face. The NTUC dared to be different. NTUC's opting for sanity has been proved right by its success. The founding of the NTUC should be commemorated as a historical milestone. It has introduced into Singapore a rational, responsible and positive trade union movement. We wish to thank our older union leaders and friends for their far-sightedness, their efforts and the sacrifices which they have made in the past 25 years.

I am confident that with your support we will rise to the challenge as we have done so confidently in the past. We have come of age. We look forward with confidence to many more years of success for the NTUC and its affiliates in the future.

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