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**SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, SECRETARY-GENERAL, NTUC  
AT THE 1992 MAY DAY RALLY AT THE SINGAPORE CONFERENCE  
HALL ON 1 MAY 1992 AT 10.00 AM**

The May Day Rally this year is special. We are not having the usual festive type of celebration. Our single-minded concern this year is the membership recruitment drive. Our objective is simple. We want to do more for our union members and all working Singaporeans. But we can do more only if we are strong. And we can only be strong if our membership keeps growing, not shrinking. Therefore the size of the membership from which we gather our strength is important to us.

At the Organising Seminar in Pattaya earlier this year, I spoke to many of you about the need to have a strong labour movement. Let me reiterate the reasons why we need a strong labour movement.

Organised labour represents about one fifth of our nation's bargainable workforce. Yet, it is organised labour that speaks for and represents the working men and women of Singapore. NTUC is the voice for their grievances and aspirations. We are their voice at the workplace. We are their voice in the political arena.

What can labour do to strengthen its voice? There is only one thing we can do, that is to strengthen the labour movement. To do that we must increase union membership. We can do this by getting more workers in unionised companies to become union members. We can also unionise more companies.

In Austria, the national trade union centre OGB is

powerful. The power is centred on OGB. Its affiliated unions have no legal status; the affiliated unions cannot own property or sign legal contracts unless the national centre authorises them to do so. The affiliated unions of OGB keep only 5-21 percent of the union fees, the rest are forwarded to the OGB for a larger purpose of providing benefits and facilities to all union members. And their workers have indeed benefitted more by such an arrangement. The fact that more than 60 percent of its workforce are union members shows the effectiveness of such an arrangement.

In quoting the OGB example, I am not suggesting that we should follow the OGB formula of sharing the affiliation fees between affiliated unions and NTUC. My purpose of quoting the OGB example is to show how the labour movement as a whole can benefit from a strong national trade union centre.

So our unions must see the larger objective of the labour movement and support NTUC and SLF projects. NTUC receives only 25 percent of your union subscription fees, you keep the other 75 percent. With this meagre 25 percent fees, we set up the NTUC Club, we build resort facilities. The purpose of setting up the NTUC Club, and the various social and recreational facilities, and providing other Club concession schemes, is to help improve the quality of life of workers, and to make union membership more attractive. And our affiliated unions get to reap the benefit of increasing membership and an even healthier income for the unions. It is therefore in the interest of the affiliated unions themselves to help NTUC and NTUC Club to grow and expand.

As a result of the 1985 organising effort, we have checked the trend towards declining membership. Although our membership has increased - from a low of 186,000 in 1984 to 217,000 today - the percentage of union membership within the bargainable workforce remains the same: at around 22 percent. This is because our total workforce has also grown correspondingly in the same period. So, in mounting this new campaign, we are not only trying to raise our membership in

absolute number, but also the percentage of union membership. It is not good enough for us to just represent one out of five workers. Between 1985 and 1991, we recruited a total of 211,000 members. But at the same time, we lost about 180,000 members who gave up their union cards. Many have retired. Many others have found jobs in non-unionised establishments or have been promoted out of bargainable ranks.

Now, many unions have set up General Branches. With General Branches, workers who move into the non-unionised sector can retain their union links and continue to enjoy union benefits. It also enables other workers in the same sector to become members, and enjoy the same benefits.

The potential membership for the General Branch is large. More than 2,400 companies, which employ at least 50 workers each, have yet to be unionised. For the smaller companies with fewer workers, the number is more than 70,000. The only difference between the General Branch and Ordinary Branch is that unions will not be able to represent the General Branch members for collective bargaining, or if they run into problems at workplace. Our unions should wherever possible, work towards transforming these General Branches into Ordinary Branches, so that workers involved will get the full protection of unions.

Lately, the Ministry of Labour (MOL) issued guidelines on the eligibility of supervisors and junior executives to join the same unions as their rank-and-file employees. But some employers fear that, in such a situation, there will be conflict of interests. This fear, as shown by a recent MOL survey, is more imaginary than real.

For more than 40 years, teachers, principals and senior staff in the Ministry of Education have been allowed to join the Singapore Teachers' Union. In POSB Employees Union, all staff up to Assistant Manager level, are allowed to join the union. There have been no conflict of interest.

But why are some employers still so fearful of their junior executives joining the union? Is it because they have misconceptions about unions or because of the poor image of the labour movement? Perhaps we have to find a more effective way to reach out to both employers and workers, keep them informed about the activities and role of our unions, and correct misconceptions they may have about the labour movement.

It is also for this reason that we are launching a nationwide campaign today to promote trade unionism and trade union membership. There will be programmes on SBC and Radio Heart, articles, messages in national papers, and public talks to project the image of NTUC and to encourage workers to join unions.

In early April, NTUC Club advertised in the newspapers calling on Singaporeans to join the unions, and inform them that they can now apply through NTUC Club. Within two weeks of the advertisement, NTUC Club received about 1,800 returns using the newspaper coupons applications, and several thousand telephone enquiries. Of the 1,800 application forms NTUC Club received, 67 percent (1,200) are eligible to join General Branch membership. 10 percent (172) are eligible to join some existing unions as ordinary members, and 10 percent (190) are eligible to join NTUC Club directly as Associate members. The balance 13 percent (234) are not eligible because they are managers in non-unionised sector, self-employed or unemployed.

I am encouraged by the response. It shows that many Singaporeans want to join the unions and the NTUC Club, but do not know how. Many don't even know they are eligible. The potential for enlarging our union membership is therefore tremendous. We must seize the opportunity to bring those who are eligible on board the labour movement, make it easy for them to become union and Club members, and welcome them with open arms.

In the recent exercise, after receiving the 1,800 applications, NTUC Club referred them to an allocation committee

to determine their eligibility and which union they should join. NTUC Club then referred the applications to the respective unions and asked them to process them quickly so that it could start issuing Club membership cards. Some unions wanted more time to get details and photographs of the applicants and to approve the applications. They need several weeks. If you add this to the time the Club needs to do its own processing, it will probably take two to three months before an applicant could get his card. This is too long a delay. It is no good. It is bad for our image.

I am therefore considering an alternative way to overcome this problem. We can ask NTUC Club to be the one-stop membership processing centre, and publicise it as such. It will issue union application forms, collect the data, photos and membership fees directly from the applicants and process the applications immediately. At the same time, NTUC Club will send the applications and data to the affiliated unions for their immediate endorsement and follow-up. We will admit all eligible applicants to the NTUC Club within one month of the submission of the particulars. NTUC Club can charge the affiliated unions a processing fee. This central processing system will serve as a focal point and is more convenient to both the potential members and the unions.

For our recruitment programme to be successful, we need to gather feedback from members and workers. Such timely feedback from the ground will help us adjust or refine our programmes and policies, and to give our members what they want, not what we think they want. To get people to accept our ideas and programmes, we as union leaders need to know what people think and how they will react. Experience and intuition may provide an answer, but only a good understanding and empathy with the ground can provide the correct answer. The public impact of every decision should be thought through in advance - not afterwards, when it may be too late. We cannot rely on public relations to 'mop up' after mistakes are made.

That feedback from the ground is crucial. I hold informal gatherings with union and branch leaders every week at the NTUC Club. Through these sessions, I try to gather feedback from branch leaders about problems regarding industrial relations in their companies, and how workers feel about programmes that we intend to implement, or projects that we have undertaken.

Union leaders like yourselves can lead effectively only if you know and understand the people around you. You must get to the ground, and listen to your members. Sometimes we cannot depend entirely on everything we are told. We should be there, on the ground, to experience the real situation and the mood of the people. So let's get to the ground. Recruit more to join the union. And, together, we will build a strong and constructive labour movement in Singapore.

On this note, I conclude by wishing you and all our workers a happy May Day and every success in our nationwide recruitment campaign.

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