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SPEECH BY MR ONG TENG CHEONG, SECRETARY-GENERAL, NTUC
AT THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER OF BATU/TIWU ON
25TH JULY 1992 AT MANDARIN BALLROOM AT 8.20 PM

1 Thank you for inviting me to your 10th Anniversary celebration. I would like to take this opportunity to speak on our recent NTUC membership recruitment campaign.

2 When the NTUC launched its membership recruitment drive in May this year, some employers, from those companies that are yet to be unionised, felt uneasy and threatened. Many of them still harbour the misconception and fear about unions. They fear that having a union in their company will restrict their flexibility in management, and that union leaders will make unreasonable demands and create trouble.

3 These fears and concerns are unfounded. Unions in Singapore have proven to be responsible and co-operative. Rather than being a drag on the operational efficiency of companies, they have been a source of strength. They have contributed significantly to fostering economic growth and company performances.

4 In the last 11 years, there was only one strike in Singapore. It is not because our unions are weak or toothless. Rather, it is a testimony to the responsible and enlightened attitude of our union leaders. They will take industrial action if necessary, but only as a last resort when all negotiations fail, and when employers are blatantly unreasonable.

5 Employers need not be fearful of unions if they have taken good care of their employees, and reward them fairly. There would be no need for unions at all if all employers always look after their workers well. Unfortunately, we do not live in a perfect world.

6 The union provides a useful channel for workers to seek redress on matters concerning their work conditions and compensation. For the unions to be effective, they need to be strong and united.

7 The membership recruitment drive is not just about increasing our numbers. It is about informing and educating the public, both workers and employers, about the role of unions, and removing the misconception of unions.

8 It is about winning the trust and confidence of our employers. It is about widening the opportunities for more workers to enjoy the benefits of union membership. It is about retaining workers in the union fold after they have changed jobs to non-unionised companies.

Basic Strategies and approach

9 The strategies for the membership recruitment campaign were thoroughly discussed and debated at the Organising seminar held in February this year in Pattaya.

10 A key strategy for the membership drive is the formation of the general branch, which will allow workers from non-unionised companies to join the general branch of a union.

11 The general branch concept will enable more workers to become union members, and to enjoy the recreational and social benefits of union membership. It will also allow those who are employed on a part-time or contractual basis to become union members.

12 To allay their fears about unionisation, I met with several construction company employers this year to explain to them the General Branch concept. The majority were supportive of the concept. Ten companies have even supported the formation of the Branch Union in their companies.

Organising Executives: Fears of Employers

13 The NTUC recruitment effort has been successful so far. Included among the applicants are a small number who are executives, professionals, and supervisory staff. Employers have expressed concern about their executive and management staff being allowed to join the same rank and file union as the workers. They fear that this could give rise to conflicts of interest, and a weakening of discipline in the workforce.

14 There are several aspects to this issue which need to be clarified and understood before we can address their concerns effectively.

15 First, the definition. It is not clear what constitutes "managerial or executive positions".

16 This has given rise to abuse by some employers who have given bogus executive titles to bargainable employees, in an attempt to prevent them from joining unions.

17 The Ministry of Labour has issued a set of guidelines on the eligibility of an employee to join a rank and file union. One of the principal criteria for an employee to join a union is that he must not have direct authority or substantive influence on hiring, firing, promotion, transfer, reward, or discipline of other employees.

18 He should not be given duties and responsibilities that are in conflict with his affiliation with the union; he should not have access to confidential information relating to labour management matters; and he should not be entrusted to represent the interests of the employer in labour management matters.

19 NTUC supports the MOL guidelines. We have been following these guidelines in our recruitment campaign.

20 The second aspect to this issue is whether executives should be allowed to become members of the same rank and file union.

21 From the employers' stand point, executive and management staff should not be allowed to be union members, let alone being members of the rank and file union.

22 What is the union's stand? Traditionally, workers do not welcome executives or management staff to be members of the same union. This is especially true of unions in America and Britain, which tend to adopt a more hostile and arms length approach towards their relationship with management.

23 In Japan, the approach is different. The Japanese model stresses greater team work and cooperation between labour and management. Japanese trade union law allows middle management, except those from the Personnel Department, to join the rank and file union.

24 Hitachi Zosen Singapore, a ship building company, allows its engineers, administrative officers, and safety inspectors to be ordinary members of SMEEU. Senior executives, managers, and confidential staff are also encouraged to join the union as associate members. Ninety five percent of the total company workforce are union members. Several of the senior executives were former union officials.

25 The Hitachi Zosen example shows that there need not always be a conflict of interest when executives are members of the same rank and file union. It is a happy example where both union and management see the benefits of allowing executives to be members of the same union.

26 By far the more common examples in Singapore are the cases where executives form their own unions. This is perhaps the answer to employers who object to their management staff

joining their rank and file unions. SBOA, AESU, POU and SMOU are examples of executive unions. They work along with their rank and file unions - SBEU, SIASU, SPWU and SOS. This arrangement will end up having two unions representing the two different groups of employees in the company, and allay employers' fear of conflicts of interest.

Our approach

27 On the question of allowing executives to join unions, I think we need to take a practical approach. Our primary concern must be to look after the interest of rank and file workers. Hence, our organising and recruitment efforts have been targetted at rank and file employees. They are the ones who require our assistance most.

28 Executives, with greater job mobility, are better able to look after their own interests. However, we should not exclude them from the union fold. Allowing executives to join unions will enrich the pool of people who can contribute to the union movement.

29 However, if employers continue to object to executives joining the rank and file unions, perhaps the best option is to encourage the formation of Executive Union. Executives from all companies can then become members of this Executive Union. This is permissible under the law.

Conclusion

30 We will continue to show to employers that unions are capable partners of growth. A strong and responsible union movement can help galvanise workers to excel, and to improve productivity, thereby helping companies to remain competitive.

31 The thrust of the NTUC's membership recruitment drive has been targeted at rank and file employees. This is in line with the principal objectives of the NTUC membership recruitment campaign, which is to extend the benefits provided by NTUC and the union to as many workers as possible.

32 We will leave the door open to junior executives. They are welcome to join us if they wish. We may set up an Executives Union if employers are fearful of possible conflicts of interest. We will be pragmatic and open in our approach. In return, we hope that employers, too, would be more open and receptive in their approach.

33 May I take this opportunity to wish BATU/TIWU a happy 10th Anniversary and wish the unions every success in their future endeavours.

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Note: BATU = Building Construction & Timber Industries
Employees' Union

TIWU = Textile Industries Workers' Union

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