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SPEECH BY MR SIA KAH HUI, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LABOUR  
AT THE OPENING OF "THE MACHINE AND YOU" - TECHNICAL WORKSHOP  
ON SAFE USE OF MACHINERY AT THE REGIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE  
ON FRIDAY, 8 JULY 1977 AT 9.00 A.M.

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The subject of this Workshop is "The Machine And You" and not "You And The Machine". This shows the importance we give the machines. Though created by men machines have now assumed an importance in the life of men more than anything else. They are in a position to 'break' or 'make' a man, so to speak. Many have become rich because of machines and life has become more comfortable for everyone. However, for some, machines are their undoing. They have paid with their lives. Since men created the machines we have to see that they are to do more good and not to do more harm. Men must have complete control of the machines. This is why you are here this morning.

Without going into the distant past let us just take the statistics of the last two years. There were more than 1,800 accidents caused directly by the use of machines. Two were fatal and 168 resulted in the amputations of limbs, whilst the rest were classified as minor or temporary disablement. In fact, of all accidents resulting in permanent partial disablements, more than 70% are attributable to accidents involving machinery. From these statistics we can see the seriousness of the problem relating to the use of machinery in industry.

The Government has always been aware of the hazards pertaining to the use of machinery. The Factories Act, 1973,

requires occupiers of factories to securely fence all dangerous parts of machinery and to ensure that the fencing and other safeguards provided for the machinery are constantly maintained and kept in position. In addition, the Act also specifies that all workers must be fully instructed as to the dangers likely to arise in connection with the use of the machinery and be sufficiently trained or adequately supervised by one who has a thorough knowledge and experience of the machine.

Both these aspects of the legal requirements have not been fully complied with. Some factory occupiers still have not taken the necessary steps to safeguard the dangerous parts of machinery used in their factories. Last year, 8 employers were charged and fined in court for failing to take the necessary measures to fence up dangerous parts of machinery. Many others have been served with warning notices to comply with the legal requirements.

On the other hand, the general lack of training given to operators attending to machinery is well-known to all of you. This is especially so with operators of heavy mobile plants such as mobile cranes. The improper operation of such machinery by untrained operators has resulted in serious accidents. The Ministry is very concerned over the increasing number of accidents involving mobile plants and is now seriously considering the proposition of prescribing in the law the minimum training and qualifications that operators of such heavy mobile plants must have before they are permitted to be employed as operators.

You, I am sure are familiar with the reasons given for non-observance of these legal requirements. For one thing it is claimed that it is a hindrance to production work if guards are put up for certain parts of the machinery. Further, if we have to give proper training to the machine operators it will cause disruption to our work schedules. There are all sorts of other reasons but whatever they may be I cannot help but think that they are a manifestation of insufficient appreciation of the problem or just simply a case of false sense of economy.

The matter of safety and health for industrial workers is not new. Numerous studies have been made in the past both by academicians, industrialists and others. In our context the problem is becoming more serious as we press on with industrialisation.

Mere exhortations from the authorities and the declarations of concern of those intimately involved in the general welfare of workers have yet to receive the whole-hearted response from the people who are directly responsible for the life and limb of workers.

Your presence here today is an indication that we are getting somewhere in our combined effort to find solutions to the question of industrial accidents prevention. We are to some extent more fortunate because we are in a position to study the various methods adopted by the more advanced countries but it is up to us to find solutions relevant to our stage of development.

This Technical Workshop will give an opportunity for participants to pool their experience in order that a better standard of safety in the use of machinery may be achieved. It is also the aim of this Workshop to disseminate knowledge in the general principles of safety in the design and use of machinery.

I am pleased to learn that there has been very good response to participate in this Workshop from the industries, particularly the shipbuilding and repairing industry, the wood-working industry and the metal working industry. With such wide participation, I am confident that the Workshop will come up with concrete proposals and programmes which will serve as useful guidelines for making machinery safer to work with. As the subject concerns the life of our fellowmen I would urge that you apply your minds with all seriousness to the deliberations and I wish you every success. It is now my pleasure to declare this Workshop open.