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SPEECH BY MR SIA KAH HUI, MINISTER OF STATE FOR LABOUR,
AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE ILO/DANIDA/REGIONAL SEMINAR
ON ECONOMIC EDUCATION FOR WORKERS AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES
ON WEDNESDAY, 3 MAY 1978, AT 10.00 A.M. AT THE APOLLO HOTEL

I am glad to see so many trade union activists from different working environments gathered together in one place. The exchange of views and experience must be an education in itself, an education which cannot be acquired in the limitations of a classroom. In the nature of things a seminar of this kind is of great value to the participants because of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences. The varied and wide working experience of all of you will certainly make your deliberations more interesting and beneficial to everyone concerned.

Traditionally, labour education is oriented around providing general introductory courses on trade-unionism and basic subjects like collective-bargaining, labour laws, grievance handling, job evaluation etc. They are all fundamental to trade-union education, and will no doubt continue to occupy a large part of the curricula.

However, the oil crisis and the slow recovery of the world economy has changed the economic prospects and fortunes of most countries. Growth rate is expected to be low. Reflationary measures are restrained because of their inflationary effect. Unemployment still remains high and protectionism is spreading. In brief, the international economic outlook is dim and uncertain.

In the face of all this, and as part measure to remedy it, we will all need to adjust expectations to more realistic levels. Coming so soon after the heyday of rapid, and, in certain cases, double-digit growth in the closing decade of the 1960s and the first quarter of the 1970s, this can be difficult. Nonetheless, the process is imperative if we are to strengthen our capacity to meet the challenge of an unfavourable international situation.

In this lowering of expectations, the labour sector especially needs to be carefully oriented. It forms the largest single entity in any country. It is also a potential source of social unrest. Fortunately, the workers are open to reason and persuasion. If it is carefully explained to them why things are going to be less rosy than before and the factors which brought this about, they will understand and accept the realities. It would be better if we can also show them how they can through their contributions and help prevent the situation from worsening and thereby minimising any adverse effects on their job-security and livelihood.

This is where labour economic education is of importance. In the not too distant past when the world economy was relatively more stable and healthy, there was less necessity and urgency to emphasise economic education for workers. All that they were required to know was some elementary knowledge of the economic structure and how it functions, and the factors that shape it. Normally, one or two lectures would suffice for

this purpose. Now the economic situation is more acute. As such, economic education for workers becomes indispensable and needs to be dealt with in greater depth and coverage.

As we see it in Singapore, economic education means enabling our workers to appreciate the dynamics of the national economy, its significance to them in terms of wages, employment, future prospects and the response expected from them to further economic growth. In structuring the programme therefore, certain basic factors must be taken into account.

Firstly, the various factors underlying the country's economy should be outlined, for example, how it came to be what it is today, the present problems and future prospects, and the economic development trends envisaged. Coverage of future manpower requirements would help them make contingencies for retraining and upgrading of skills. A brief overview of the world's economic situation too is desirable.

Secondly, there should be definite suggestions on how they can contribute to the national economic effort. One instance is to work out various means towards an increase in labour productivity. Their stakes in the whole endeavour should be so spelt out that it causes them to realise that by helping the common polity, they are ultimately advancing their own interest. It may be necessary for them in the short-term to make certain sacrifices and trim down expectations.

Thirdly, there must be an adequate feedback system to keep them informed of the latest available data on the progress of the national economy, the developments under each economic indicator, the labour force prospects, the changes to come and the adjustments to make. The information to be disseminated to the workers can be channelled through trade-union publications, special bulletins, the radio, the TV and the press.

The Singapore National Trades Union Congress launched a mammoth economic education programme last October with the theme "Job Creation or Job Loss - What Every Singaporean Should Know About The Economics of Survival." It was launched with a national seminar attended by over 500 trade-union leaders, officers and branch officials. Affiliated unions are organising a series of follow-up seminars on the same theme. Members of Parliament and others were recruited to be resource persons. Special reports on the status of selected industries were commissioned. A book on the main theme was published. It is now a standard textbook on the Singapore economy for schools. This whole economic education programme will take 2 - 3 years to complete.

By the time the programme is over, our workers would know and better appreciate their link with the overall welfare of the country. This, it is hoped, will eventually be reflected in their better performance and more responsible attitude to work.

I am fully aware that not all the trade unions have the personnel resources to conduct economic education courses, at least not on certain aspects of it. One possible way out is to approach the universities and research institutes for assistance.

In developed economies, it is quite common to find the universities and the trade unions working together to promote labour education. In some instances, schools for workers were established within universities. This practice is worth serious consideration by developing countries. Government ministries and statutory bodies are another such source of informed personnel for unions to tap. I am sure something can be worked out which will be mutually beneficial to both sides.

As part of long-term planning and to be self-sufficient in this field, trade-unions may want to look into the possibility of building up their own corps of instructors in labour economic education. However, this must be justified by adequate number of such courses conducted in a year. Otherwise, it may be more practical to utilize outside resources. In the case of smaller unions with limited means, they could pool their resources together to undertake such a programme. In our case NTUC is in a strong position to continue to plan and organise workers' education in all relevant subjects.

Since there are few textbooks or reference books available for use in labour economic education courses, it may be necessary for the trade unions to publish their own books and reference materials. Developing one's own books has also the advantage of enabling them to be specially tailored and styled for easy reading and comprehension by our own workers.

Since economic education of the workers benefits the business and industrial enterprises in a large way, they should come in to make a contribution as well. This they can do by helping to defray the training costs involved, and to provide paid leave for those union members selected to attend the courses. They can also open their premises for holding the courses. In addition, many large companies have in their employ economists and other professional people who can give assistance by contributing working papers and even lead in the teaching programme. Their employers should be prepared to release them for such work whenever they are needed.

Labour education programmes are of great importance at all times and particularly at this juncture. The holding of this seminar is therefore timely and I wish it every success. May I take this opportunity to extend a very warm welcome to our friends from overseas and wish them all a pleasant and profitable stay in our Republic.