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SPEECH BY MR EUGENE YAP, PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY (LABOUR),  
AT THE OPENING OF THE OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH SEMINAR  
ON "TOWARDS A HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE" AT SHANGRI-  
LA HOTEL (JURONG ROOM) ON FRIDAY 11 NOVEMBER 1983 AT 9.00 AM

I recently came across an article which described the appalling conditions workers are being subjected to in some factories and work-places in certain parts of the world. For example, workers have to harvest crops while fields are being sprayed with pesticides. Another instance involved workers being confined in an unventilated factory working with glass that is heated to over 1,500°C. Yet others suffer irreparable damage from carrying heavy loads while working in brickyards.

These are terrible conditions indeed and are characteristic of the callous exploitative attitude of unenlightened employers who manage to escape censure and who are taking advantage of poor government administration and the poverty and suffering of massive unemployment. These unfortunate workers have no choice but to work under such atrocious conditions in order to eke out a living to survive.

In Singapore, where the Government is good, employers enlightened and a workforce that is becoming increasingly educated, such conditions cannot prevail. In fact, such conditions are unimaginable here. However, we can draw a deduction from this comparison and that is, as we move into the future, it will become more difficult to attract good and highly productive workers if the working

environment is not a safe and healthy one. Hence today's Seminar on Occupational Safety and Health in relation to productivity is indeed very timely.

In Singapore, the development of our human resources is of vital importance. As we move on ever upwards, adopting higher and more sophisticated technology, we must not leave our workers behind. The workforce must constantly be brought up-to-date in skills and it is the employers who must see to that aspect. Then too, as our workers are being upgraded in skills, the environment they work in must also be simultaneously upgraded and the other needs of workers and their welfare be seen to.

If employers want to run a competent and efficient outfit, they must ensure a safe working environment, that is, they have to eliminate as far as possible risks to life and limb. By safeguarding their workers' health, wise managers can save themselves a lot of trouble. These considerations are really obligatory. Yet why are some employers still not giving sufficient attention to them? In the end, it is like running a limousine with a screw loose.

In any business, the dollars and cents is of course the common goal. It is the practised cult. A business must run on profit. It is ridiculous to think otherwise. But this goal is often so tangible that it numbs our sensitivity to other important aspects like the workers' working environment, the workers' safety and health. It would become disastrous if a business was run for the sole purpose of profit at the expense of workers' safety and health.

We should not forget that for a business to prosper, you need a good team and you cannot possibly run a good team if members are not fit. It is possible with a good deal of luck to win one or two rounds but your team will never be number one. You may not want to be number one, you may say, but when the teams you have beaten buck up, you will be last!

Hence it is important to consider the members of your team, their aspirations, what makes them tick, what motivates them to give their best. In order to have a strong hold on your business and to steer it in the desired direction, you will have to give time and thought to what attracts workers to your company. Wages is but one factor. What is very important is to provide the kind of environment that will draw the best from your workers. Introduce new safeguards to prevent accidents and develop measures to curb health hazards. A safe and pleasant work environment will provide the necessary impetus for increased productivity. The opposite is counter productive. Ill health and industrial accidents represent unnecessary loss, not only to the unfortunate victim and his family, but also to the company and the Nation.

To create a safe and healthy work environment is therefore mandatory on the part of the employer but to provide and maintain such an environment requires a good manager. Having attended a course or a seminar such as this one, and having taken the trouble to plough through chapter after chapter of case studies on how others succeed, it is possible that some of us may still go back to our work-place and find it impossible to apply what we have learnt to improve things. The reason for such a situation lies in the nature of the boss himself. I certainly hope it is not the case with us today. It has been said that a good manager is born not made. That may be so, but we all know that a born manager is not easy to come by, which makes it compulsory for us to learn to be good managers and through sheer will and dedication to workers' welfare, ensure a safe and healthy work-place for everyone. With the born-manager, it will be easier to get things moving and to push a company into the number one position. Such persons will be a boon not only to their workers and companies, but also to the shareholders who invest their money in the companies. They will be able to get maximum returns for an efficiently run

organization where workers are highly motivated and work safely to produce the goods with all their hearts and all their minds, goods which are of high quality. This does not mean that "made" managers cannot achieve such targets. They can through learning and sheer will and dedication.

It is disheartening to note however that the number of industrial accidents over the last five years is still high. In 1978, there were 4,554 accidents. In 1980, there were 6,087 cases and last year, 5,891.

Our workers are insured against the risk of accidents under the mandatory Workmen's Compensation Act. In 1978, \$15.8 million was paid out in compensation. This increased to \$17.6 million in 1980 and to \$27.2 million last year.

In TANGIBLE terms, this represents a loss of 894,361 man days in 1978, 463,412 man days in 1980 and 581,903 man days last year. On last year's man days lost, this amounts to about 2,000 workers being paid for the year for not working because they were hurt by industrial accidents.

In INTANGIBLE terms, injuries in the work-place will disrupt work, affect product quality and, above all, lead to low morale. Occupational diseases cause suffering and, in some cases, lead to slow painful deaths. These losses far exceed the sums of money that are paid out in compensation.

A lot more needs to be done. There is an urgent need for management and workers to work closely together, to be as it were, hand in glove to improve safety at work-places.

To achieve this, every employee must be kept informed of all safety and health matters that affect his daily work. This will necessitate training, promotional

campaigns and collection and dissemination of all relevant information to workers. The shipbuilding and shiprepairing industries have done so, and results are quite promising. I urge the other industries to do the same.

Then there is the question of the SAFETY COMMITTEE. Safety awareness alone is not enough. This awareness must be extended to understanding, acceptance, responsibility and ultimately, to the practice of safety improvements. You are aware that Quality Control Circles (or QCCs) have proven to be instrumental in enhancing quality and productivity through teamwork and participation. Safety Committees should therefore adopt the QCC approach in their efforts to foster team spirit in solving safety problems. Through working with one another, a worker will be obligated not only to himself, but also to the safety and welfare of his fellow colleagues in the team. This form of self-regulation will inevitably lead to improvements in safety and health standards.

There is also the question of safe systems of work and work procedures. Employers must look seriously at issues which concern the relationship between man and his working environment such as:-

- \* Improvements in man-machine safety, through better layout, design and guarding;
- \* Enhancing the physical work environment through improvements in ventilation, lighting and noise control; and
- \* Provision of adequate first-aid and clinical facilities and competent personnel to deal with illnesses and injuries at the work-place.

Finally and this is a very important consideration - commitment to safety by both management and employees. Management must provide the financial, physical and moral

support to safety and health programmes and must be seen to be doing it, then only will workers believe in management. On the other hand, workers must adjust their attitude towards safety. They must be prepared to undergo training to upgrade their skills and knowledge in identifying and controlling the hazards in their work-place. The responsibility of safeguarding their own health and safety, as well as that of their colleagues, is of great importance towards a healthier and productive workforce.

Now, it gives me great pleasure to declare this Seminar open.

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