

Training Takes The Lead



By
Marcus Lin

U pturn or downturn, there will be no let up in the drive for a high quality, sustainable

educational system as it is the best investment for the future. To that end, Education Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen told participants at the third run of The Singapore Manual & Mercantile Workers' Union Tripartite Initiative forum on 5 June 2009 that the Government will not flinch in its spending and efforts.

At the event, SMMWU shared information, views and ideas on economic and labour-related issues with about 130 chief executive officers, managing directors, general managers, human resource practitioners, union officials from 39 unionised companies as well as tripartite representatives. Topics included managing excess manpower, re-employment of older workers and enhancing contract and casual workers' interests.



Food For Thought... Participants at the SMMWU CEO breakfast dialogue session with Education Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen had plenty to chew on.

Dr Ng pushed the idea of an education system "to fit the child rather than the child fit the system". It will be more rounded and develop soft skills like interactive, analytical and leadership qualities.

"All these initiatives that I talked about over the next 3, 5 to 10 years will require one key ingredient - teachers. We are going to invest heavily in our teaching force, to sustain high quality. I have now about nearly 30,000 teachers. The Ministry of Education is one ministry that hires 1 in 8 graduates from the public universities. There is a limit to how far

we can go but we are stepping up recruitment in the downturn," said Dr Ng.

He revealed that from hiring about 2,400 teachers in 2008, MOE will this year hire 3,000, an increase of 25 per cent. Also, as of 31 May 2009, more than 16,000 applications were processed which is about 10 per cent more than last year. Nevertheless, Dr Ng assured that standards will not be lowered. As of 31 May 2009, more than 2,000 teacher candidates have been recruited which is 80 per cent of the target.

Recruitment of support staff and allied

educators who assist the teachers in behavioural support and counselling will also be increased. The current 600 allied educators will be increased to 2,800 by 2015. This year alone 500 will be hired and about 75 per cent of that has been reached.

Dr Ng, who is a former Manpower Minister, stressed that the heavy investment in schemes like the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience, Continuing Education and Training Centres and NTUC's e2i (Employment and Employability Institute) is primarily for workers to create value in themselves, saying "we believe that the best protection for a worker is the worker himself."

Chief Executive Officer of e2i Ang Hin Kee said: "Of the 94,000 workers presently training under SPUR, about one-third or 33,500 of them are individuals who actually walked through CET Centres and signed up for training on their own. It shows that Singapore workers are not totally dependent on companies to send them or for the Government or unions to persuade them. It is a significant indication to us that workers realise the need to upgrade and re-skill themselves."

To help short-handed Small and Medium Enterprises avail themselves of training, Mr Ang added that there are specially-tailored schemes like 'On-Site Bite-Sized' to help them.

At the probing of Dr Ng in a dialogue session, senior management figures acknowledged that SPUR and the Jobs Credit scheme have shaped their recruitment, retrenchment and expansion plans.

Out Of Darkness Into Light



By
Jansen Yeo

T here are many depressing stories to be told during an economic downturn. Few are heartwarming like this. Read on...

"This company I handled was in financial difficulties even before the current economic downturn. They started delaying salary payments to the workers as early as April 2007 but things really came to a head in September last year when the company only paid \$400 per person for work done the previous month.

"The delay was long and painful for the workers. Even when they were getting paid, their salaries were being delayed for about 1.5 months. Eventually, the company owed them about three months worth of salary before it closed," said Priscilla Toh, Industrial Relations Officer with the Building, Construction and Timber Industries Employees' Union.

This was especially hard on the workers. Miss Toh shared: "There was one worker who was the sole breadwinner to a wife bedridden with cancer and a 15-year-old son. He was facing severe difficulties taking care of his wife and making ends meet. The non-Singaporean workers were also facing trouble with simply keeping a roof over their heads as they were unable to pay the rent." It was the plight of her members that inspired Miss Toh to make a passionate argument during the Court hearings to ensure that the workers get paid.

"It was very frustrating to see the workers put in so much sweat and backbreaking work and then not get their just dues. They all have families depending on them to put food on the table and roofs over their heads. As their IRO, I had to make a strong case for them. And I'm glad that the Court awarded the case to us. It was a culmination of close to two years of hard work put in by the union and it paid off," said Miss Toh.

To date, the employer has yet to pay the workers their arrears. The union had previously applied for a Writ of Seizure and Sale, and enforced it to the extent of getting a bailiff to seize the machinery in the company but a bank, through their lawyers, proved that the machinery belonged to them by way of a Deed of Debenture. BATU is not giving up though and are pursuing other avenues to compel the employer to pay the workers.

At the same time, the union has helped place most of the workers in new jobs through internal referrals or through NTCU's e2i (Employment and Employability Institute).

"I believe that the workers were heartened by the union going to Court on their behalf, making them feel that there was an outlet that they could turn to and to do something for them," said Miss Toh.

That's not the only bright spot. The last two years may have been heart-wrenching for the workers but it also revealed the true meaning of solidarity to Miss Toh.

She said: "Workers who were owed salaries were still dipping into their savings to loan money to their non-Singaporean colleagues to pay their rent. One of our members working as a junior executive, already being owed two months salary, was given an option of either being paid one month of arrears or have the amount being split among the colleagues so everyone got a few hundred dollars. She chose the second option.

"Even in difficult times, the workers still went beyond their means to help whoever in need. It was really heart-warming."



You Earned It... SURAWU Exco members, together with Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng (seventh from left) and NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee Say (fifth from right), congratulate SURAWU Vice President Lee Chit Seng (holding award) on his Comrade of Labour Award at the May Day Dinner 2009.



The Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority Workers' Union was formed in 1975. It currently has 506 members - 431 Ordinary Branch members and 75 General Branch members. The union aims to achieve 5 per cent membership growth in the short term and subsequently 10 per cent in the long term.

Seeking New Blood



By
Jansen Yeo

It's that time again. Members of the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority Workers' Union will be gearing up for the union's 8th Triennial General Meeting in the later part of this year. The current Executive Council will complete their 3-year term of office and prepare for election of a change in new leadership.

There is, however, an urgent need to bring in new blood, and speed up and facilitate

the transfer of knowledge and skills to allow for smooth transfer of responsibilities from incumbents to successors. The current Exco is hoping to witness a breakthrough in its efforts to achieve a more balanced composition of leadership, and to provide for a smooth and seamless leadership renewal and succession.

"Leadership renewal and succession is a tedious and ongoing process. It is a strategic imperative for any organisation to continue to remain relevant, vibrant, strong, competent and successful," asserts Mr Freddy Lim, President of SURAWU.

"It is a clear and present challenge for

SURAWU, even as we seek out able and willing members to take up leadership positions in the union. This has become more critical and compelling because of the demographic profile of our workforce."

Many of SURAWU's members have worked at least 30 years with URA. URA has an ageing workforce - 80 per cent of its workforce is above the age of 40 years and at least 50 per cent of them are in their 50s. Those who retire from service account for about one to two per cent of URA's staff strength annually. This has been further aggravated by the fact that recruitment of rank and file workers has been put on hold for several years. This explains the lack of new blood in its membership.

Even among members, not many aspire to be union leaders.