

Making A Difference Everyday



By **Jansen Yeo**

Money used to make the world go round for Tommy Lin when he worked in a bank. Where his main concern was profits and losses – hopefully no loss! – and term contract workers were regarded as lowly educated and low-waged, associated with toil and sweat.

It has all changed since he became a Senior Consultant with National Trades Union Congress last September. As the IRO for the Unit for Contract & Casual Workers, he now does his best to look after the welfare of these workers by giving respect to their often overlooked but valuable contributions to society.

“Most of these contract and casual workers hold unglamorous jobs like cleaners and stewards at food centres. Yet, with their meager income, they have to support their families, and at the same time, play an important role in keeping Singapore clean.

“I’ve seen for myself hundreds of these workers who had their contracts terminated, thus losing their only means to support themselves and their families. I’m glad that the Labour Movement is there to help these contract and casual workers secure their jobs, thereby safeguarding not just the futures of these workers but their families as well,” said Mr Lin.

UCCW was set up in 2006 with the aim of helping contract and casual workers attain permanent employment with better wages by working with various partners to upgrade their

employability skills. Today, it has more than 8,000 members and is working tirelessly to help more such workers fight for their rights.

“The problems of contract and casual workers are deep-rooted and we have to unravel them one by one. Best sourcing is one of the key weapons to helping these workers. We are also working closely with the unions to unionise companies and get the workers represented in industrial relations matters,” said Mr Lin.

He highlights an example of how UCCW’s work changed the life of one worker for the better: “One member, an elderly female cleaner, came to us recently for advice as she felt she was dismissed unfairly by her company. The cleaning industry is one of the sectors we are targeting as cheap sourcing and wage undercutting are practiced. We found out the details from her and assisted in lodging a complaint to the Ministry of Manpower to obtain her rightful statutory benefits. We also helped to job match her with other employers so that she could continue working. She was really touched by our efforts and kept bowing and thanking us. She was glad she joined UCCW and really appreciated the help we rendered.”

Being an IRO may be mentally and physically exhausting at times, but Mr Lin takes pride in the knowledge that he has helped yet another worker gain a better life.

POU: A Good Example Of Union Credibility



By **Jansen Yeo**

Union credibility is at an all time high; it’s a good sign of how workers have come to value unions through the years as vehicles for promoting good industrial relations and championing workers rights.

The POU win of the membership recruitment award for February 2009 with the highest Monthly Net Percentage Increase of 1.81% or about 19 new members simply serves to reaffirm these points. While these numbers may seem small, they are certainly big for a house union like POU, which represents only the senior officers in PSA Singapore Terminals or approximately 900 workers.

It also explains why workers are generally more likely to turn to unions when times are bad, says Mr Benjamin Tang, General Secretary of the Port Officers’ Union. He added that most workers have seen the unions at work and are willing to put their faith in them to pull through the current situation.

Mr Tang shared how the impressive numbers were achieved: “Our most important strategy was to maintain close labour management relations. During the downturn, the management was very forthcoming in sharing information with our union on business trends, developments and challenges facing the port industry. With the close collaboration, we have built up our mutual trust



and enhanced the harmonious industrial climate in our port.

“In the eyes of the members, POU is a credible union and would be able to represent them in the workplace. Furthermore, in response to the downturn, POU waived entrance fees for the first quarter this year to entice them to sign up, which made it easier to recruit members.”

Besides relentless efforts to attract and recruit new members, focus is also on retaining existing members by keeping them updated on social benefits, such as NTUC and POU events, quarterly get-togethers, subsidised overseas tours and Dinner-cum-Award ceremonies via mass emails and union newsletters.

However, as credible as unions have come to be, Mr Tang points out that there will always be some who question their usefulness.

“One potential member posed me this question: ‘I’m an executive earning a good salary and don’t need the social benefits. I also don’t

The Port Officers’ Union was formed in 1967 and represents the senior officers in PSA Singapore Terminals. Currently, the union has 875 members – 805 Ordinary Branch members and 70 General Branch members. POU has set a target to reach 840 OB members by December 2009, a 10 per cent increase from last year.

see the need for workplace representation, as I can always go to the Ministry of Manpower directly for help. So why should I join the union and pay \$9 a month for nothing?

“We told him, ‘Yes, as an executive, you may not need the social benefits. And yes, you can always go directly to MOM for help. But please bear in mind, that during a downturn, many workers are affected too and their plights may be much worse off than you. Being an executive, you may not have priority. In any case, if you are eligible to be a union member, you will be referred to POU who will make representation on your behalf. Unfortunately, POU would not be able to represent you if you are a non-union member, and you will likely end up fighting a lonely battle. So why go through all the hassle yourself and get into an awkward situation when the union could intervene and represent you?’”

To POU, every member is important, especially in this current economic downturn. Membership is not just a numbers game; it demonstrates the strength of POU and the credibility that the union has not just among members, but also within the labour industry.