

Tripartite Help For PME Woes

The first Singapore Tripartism Forum this year on 26 January 2010 was themed "Managing Manpower Challenges 2010" but Professionals, Managers and Executives stole the show.

Acknowledging that PMEs, their growing numbers and concerns are making their presence felt in Singapore's labour landscape, Ministry of Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong told about 600 participants connected with MOM, the National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers Federation:

"We will introduce an employment dispute resolution process to help junior and mid-level PMEs earning up to \$4,500 and their employers to address common employment issues such as salary arrears, retrenchment benefit payment and other employment-related contractual issues. This process will be in place next year.

"To facilitate the PME employee and his employer to reach an amicable settlement without incurring significant costs, the proposed process will primarily involve the use of mediation. It will ride on the existing strong tripartite partnership with SNEF and NTUC, who have the expertise and track record of resolving employment disputes."

Though the exact details are still being threshed out by the tripartite partners, it is aimed at bringing about speedy and low-cost settlements. The process, to be led by MOM and leveraging on NTUC and SNEF, will help PMEs who are mostly General Branch union members in non-unionised companies and not eligible for collective bargaining or limited representation.

Where for now the aggrieved PME has recourse only to adjudication for salary claims conducted by MOM's Executive Mediation Unit that is non-tripartite, the proposed mechanism adds a new mediation component that seeks to resolve more matters earlier. The salary scope is also upped from \$2,500 to \$4,500.

"To ensure that the mediation process is successful and effective we want to tap on the expertise of the tripartite partners. Therefore, union involvement becomes an important element in making sure that this mediation process can be effective and helpful to the members who are in need," said Mr Gan, "but for PMEs who are non-union members, they will still have access to the MOM adjudication process."

Added Mr Gan: "If the dispute cannot be resolved through mediation, the PME employee may pursue his claims through the civil courts. In addition, he may refer disputes on salary claims for adjudication by MOM. The setting up of this new dispute resolution process involving mediation and adjudication will help save PMEs and their employers the costs of going through the civil court route by giving them the opportunity to mediate at an early stage, with assistance from tripartite partners. Through this tripartite partnership approach, MOM believes that many of such disputes could be resolved amicably."

He explained that the limit is currently capped



One Voice... From left: NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee Say, Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong and SNEF President Stephen Lee represent the tripartite partners that share the same aspirations for workers of Singapore.

at \$4,500 so that efforts are more targeted: "The primary objective of this dispute resolution mechanism is really to cater to the lower-income PMEs for whom the cost of going through the civil courts may be too prohibitive."

SNEF President Stephen Lee said employers also have certain concerns: "Therefore, instead of defining category and responsibility which will be very cumbersome, we've come up with a salary guide of \$4,500," and that the move "is both pro-PME and pro-company."

NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee Say said it is a significant step and not a gimmick to drive up union membership: "Let me emphasise: This whole move and new initiatives are worker-centric and PME-centric" and that "this extension of the scope of coverage really is a response to the changing profile of our workforce."

The proposed mechanism can potentially benefit more than 500,000 or half of all PMEs in the workforce as well as their employers. It also translates into 70 per cent of the resident workforce earning \$4,500 and below. "In the future, it will continue to grow. In other words, the PME workers of today will become the rank-and-file workers of tomorrow," said SG Lim.

MOM figures show that as of June 2009, the wider network of PMETs (Professionals, Managers, Executives and Technical People) form more than half of Singapore's resident workforce.



By
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