



## National Trades Union Congress

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**SPEECH BY MR LIM BOON HENG, SECRETARY-GENERAL, NATIONAL TRADES UNION CONGRESS, AND MINISTER, PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE, AT THE APPRECIATION DINNER OF SINGAPORE MARITIME OFFICERS' UNION AND WAVELINK, HELD AT THE NEPTUNE THEATRE RESTAURANT, ON 16 DECEMBER 2005, AT 7.30 PM**

Capt Robin Foo, President of SMOU,

Mr Thomas Tay, General Secretary of SMOU,

Comrades ,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

A very good evening to all of you!

1 When Thomas Tay told me a few days ago about the award that SMOU would present to me, my reaction was – that I was merely doing my job. Nevertheless, let me thank you all.

2 I have known several of your Ex-Co members for many years. Time has taken its toll! Some of us now have white hair; others have less hair; and some not only have less hair, but what remain has turned white! The signs are there. In due course, younger unionists will have to take over from us, and chart the way forward for the unions.

3 What lessons have we learnt, that we can pass on to them?

4 Firstly, workers are primarily concerned about their jobs, and whether they can earn enough to support their families.

5 Secondly, union members want to have their views heard, and their problems addressed. This means union leaders have to spend time with members. Since top leaders have only so much time, they will have to depend on the next levels of union leaders to do so. Top leaders have to spend enough time with the next levels of

union leaders so that the latter can understand the issues fully and be able to explain to members.

6 Thirdly, union members will support you only when they feel you do your best to represent their interests, and they can trust you. Trust, once broken, is very hard to earn again.

7 When we serve workers, we have to understand the business environment, know what is happening, what is changing, and how it will impact on workers.

8 2005 has indeed been a promising year for the Maritime Industry. A rosy outlook for the Maritime industry is forecasted by industry analysts right through 2006 with records of full order books for virtually all shipyards through to 2007. Cargo volumes surged to all-time high in Asia especially China. "The China Syndrome" of global manufacturing relocating to China led to a high demand for ocean transport. The busiest ports in the world are now to be found in Asia. In Singapore, the maritime industry is vibrant which contributes about 7% to the Singapore GDP and provides jobs for some 100,000 workers.

9 With globalisation and highly competitive global environment, shippers need to move their cargoes quickly around the globe to meet the Just-In-Time manufacturing requirements, speed, security and service quality are their utmost concerns. Mega vessels are built to carry more containers; manning these vessels will require high level of skills and technology in order to reach the destinations on time.

10 Therefore, our seafarers have to be on the ball and go for constant skills upgrading and development programmes. With the increase in skills and expertise, our seafarers will become more employable and the ship management companies and owners will also have a competitive edge over their business rivals.

11 To cater to the present and future training needs of officers serving on board, SMOU has established the Singapore Maritime Fund (SMTF) which currently stands at \$1.8 million. Besides promoting training and upgrading, the fund is also used in campaigns to attract the younger generation to take up seafaring as a career.

12 Every job has its pitfalls. For seafarers who are constantly on the move and face danger from piracy and terrorism, providing and ensuring that their families have something to fall back on in times of crisis is critical to them. SMOU addresses this concern by setting up the Seafarers' Provident Fund (SPF) in 2001 to enhance the welfare and protect the interests of seafaring members. I am told there are more than 10,000 members enrolled in this Fund. The fund currently stands at approximately \$8.7 million. The SPF saving scheme functions like the CPF and guarantees a minimum interest rate equivalent to that given by CPF for the Ordinary Account. SPF encourages savings and allows members reaching retirement age or physically unable to continue working onboard a ship to withdraw these savings. The fund also provides financial assistance to members and their families in times of crisis.

13 I would like to thank employers who have contributed generously to the funds that is a saver for the 'rainy' days.

14 I am pleased that SMOU being one of the biggest unions in Singapore with a membership base of more than 13,000 has done well in serving its members through its various welfare schemes.

15 Setting up Wavelink Co-operative 5 years ago brings SMOU to the next level. I am proud to hear that Wavelink has done well venturing into new frontiers and business opportunities. The revenue for 2004/2005 is S\$5.1 million, S\$1.5 million more than last year. Wavelink also expanded its business this year with the new setup of SingClass as one of its business arms and aspires to be a future Singapore Maritime Classification Organisation, SingClass will need the support from MPA together with the shipping companies, bankers and insurers to move forward.

16 Good industrial relations is critical to develop Singapore into a premier International Maritime Centre where ships hub and essential ancillary services in shipping, commerce and logistics flourish.

17 Relationships were tense in the past between the maritime authorities, shipping companies and the union. It was through the hard work put in by our past

and present leaders that we are enjoying the good tripartite relationship now. We should never take what we have now for granted, especially with tense international competition for seafarers and ships moving to more competitive ports. There will be new alliances, new needs and new scenarios. We only have to look at the Irish Ferries case to remind ourselves on how things can go wrong.

18 We must continue to nurture the trust, mutual respect and openness between leaders in the unions and the management. Only then can the spirit of tripartism thrive and remain a key competitive advantage for Singapore.

19 The union also has to re-organise itself to brace itself for a whole new world. One key challenge facing the union is the aging membership. We have been able to provide support for workers and stay relevant to the changing needs of our members through the quality of union leadership and their guidance.

20 As I said earlier, to support and sustain the labour movement, new blood and talents are needed. The quality of leadership should be harnessed, we have to continuously develop and nurture the next cadre of leaders, to build on what we have achieved, and bring the labour movement to the next level.

21 In closing, I wish SMOU and Wavelink a happy anniversary and that everyone will have an enjoyable evening. With the concerted efforts of members, union officials and employers, I believe SMOU and Wavelink will continue to reach greater heights.

Thank you.

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