

**Address by Mr Lim Swee Say – Minister, Prime Minister Office and Deputy Secretary General, NTUC at the opening of Maritime manpower Singapore 2005 on 30 September 2005 at 9am at Swissotel The Stamford – Collyer Ballroom (Level 4)**

Today is World Maritime Day. It is most appropriate for us to gather here to exchange our perspectives on the theme of Maritime Manpower Singapore 2005 on “Safety, Training and Wages”.

I am impressed by the line-up of distinguished speakers – they will be presenting their views from the perspective of employers, unions and government.

I will try to contribute to the discussion today by sharing with you my thoughts from a broader and more general perspective.

This June, I attended the International Labour Congress held in Geneva. One of the key issues discussed at the Congress was the shortage of “decent work” at the global level.

As a result, we are seeing a growing number of workers becoming unemployed or under-employed.

Basically, one global concern we all share is the trend towards “race-to-the-bottom”.

Race-to-the-bottom is a no-win development for the unions and workers all over the world. It will lead to low wage workers being exploited. More will end up becoming “working poor”.

Race-to-the-bottom is also a no-win development for businesses. It will lead to under-cutting in the marketplace and low morale at the workplace.

Eventually, product standards and service quality will suffer, customers will jump ships and businesses will come to a halt.

Race-to-the-bottom is also a no-win development for governments. The widening of wage gap and exploitation of workers will eventually lead to social divides and instability.

What we really like to see is the opposite – “Race-to-the-top”.

One way of racing to the top is for everyone to start the race at the same point in the middle – same minimum wages, regardless of skills, capabilities, nationalities and regions.

The plus point of this approach is that it prevents the race to the bottom since the bottom floor has been raised and defined.

However, it is not necessary the most effective for all workers coming from all countries and all regions.

With globalization, even though the world is fast becoming one global village, it is still important for us to recognize that the global village is not made up of one world.

From the economic angle, some countries in this global village are more developed than the others. The extent of job opportunities and job quality does differ across countries and cities.

From the social angle, some countries in this global village are equipped with a stronger and bigger social safety net than the others.

For example, some have welfare for the unemployed; some advocate workfare; whereas others may have no-fare at all. I.e. No welfare, no workfare. Having a job is the only way to survive.

Hence, instead of requiring everyone to start the race at the same salary point, an alternate approach is to take into account the economic, social and political differences across countries and regions, and allow the individual countries and/or regions to assess what is the most appropriate starting point for itself.

In other words, we could try to make the “Race-to-the-top” as healthy a race as possible; as equal the opportunity as possible, for all workers from all countries and regions.

In this regards, Governments around the globe can play their part by stepping up investment in manpower development and skills upgrading.

Unions can play their part by taking better care of the well being of the workers in general and union members in specific.

Employers can play their parts by focusing more on the upgrading of productivity and improvements in working conditions and environment. E.g. Safety, welfare, career development.

What this means is that we can all choose our own starting points, and take part in the Race-to-the-top using our comparative advantages to our benefit. This I believe is an All-Win arrangement for unions and workers – better jobs, better pay and better life.

It is also an All-Win arrangement for employers – higher productivity, better customer services, and more motivated and adaptable workforce.

Last but not least, Race-to-the-top is also an All-Win for governments – higher employment and economic upgrading.

I would like to conclude by emphasizing that whether we are from governments, employers or unions, the collective challenge of tripartite partners is to avoid “race-to-the-bottom”, and embrace “race-to-the-top” for the benefits of the workers.

I am encouraged to see that the standards of Seafaring in Asia have improved over the years and are of quality today.

As we engage in the race-to-the-top, continuous training and upgrading are important.

Asian maritime nations should collaborate with one another to enhance the standards in Asia; as well as to contribute to the progress of the international shipping industry.

I look forward to hearing your views and ideas on how best to create the environments and conditions for “race-to-the-top” to take place effectively in our global village.

Let's us all work together. We must succeed, so that global divide in our global village will be narrowed and bridged someday.