

Annex A

**TRANSCRIPT OF SENIOR MINISTER LEE HSIEN LOONG'S
INTERVIEW WITH NTUC FOR MAY DAY AWARDS
20 MARCH 2025**

Interview to be credited to: NTUC

NTUC: What is your earliest memory of the unions?

SM: The trade unionists coming to Oxley Road during election campaigns and for meetings. And I would get to meet them as a small kid and get to know that these are the good guys and supporting the PAP. And I got to know a good number of them. First those who were in the PAP, and then those who later on went over to the Barisan Sosialis, because we started off as one movement.

And sometimes we went on holidays together – once or twice. There was one holiday we went to Fraser's Hill. Must have been 1959, and I remember Dominic Puthuchery was there – he was Janil's father. Chan Sun Wing was there, who later on disappeared underground and went to the Thai border. I had met Lim Chin Siong, I think I met Fong Swee Suan. I knew Devan Nair, of course, James Puthuchery. James is Dominic's brother. I met Samad Ismail. These were all faces whom I had seen. I did not know what all this was about, but this is a trade union movement, and I believed that they were fighting for a good cause, for the welfare of the people.

Later on, of course, we split. And went off into the Barisan, some good number of them, the left wing. Then I went to school. (By the time) I was in school, the party got systematically organised, and Oxley Road was no longer election headquarters. So I did not come across them so much. But later on, when I was in MINDEF, in the early 80s, the unions were talking about teaching workers about computerisation, so I helped them with one project, together with Lim Swee Say. It was just a very small project, but it was a start for the workers. We used Apple II computers. Imagine (this) tiny little thing, but in those days, it was something new to workers.

And I think it was Singapore Teachers' Union who was doing the project. And then a couple of years later, I came into politics, stood for election, and then I was in MTI, and chairing the Economic (Review) Committee, and we ran into a severe recession, and had to work very closely with the union leaders because it was very drastic shock. It was our first recession since independence, and a very severe one. And we had to do something quite drastic. We came to this conclusion most reluctantly, but in the end, we had no choice. We decided we had to cut the CPF, and we had to persuade the workers. That was a task of mainly the second-generation Ministers and me, because that was my recommendation. And Ong Teng Cheong was NTUC Secretary-General. It was agreed; he fully understood and supported. And he carried the Central Committee with him. And we had sessions with them, face-to-face and explained this, and multiple sessions with the workers after that. (Meeting) different unions, different groups, to try and tell people, explain to people why you have to do this: "It is very drastic, but if we do not do this, we may be in for serious trouble. We do this, take the hit, hopefully the economy will recover faster."

And fortunately, they accepted this, (they) had confidence in us, and fortunately, the economy did recover quite fast. '85 was very negative. The following year, '86, was already positive. By '87 we were taking off and back to 9, 10% growth again.

I think it built personal relationships and confidence and trust, and we built on that for subsequent occasions, both during crisis and also non-crisis times. Because coming out from 1985, one of the conclusions was that our wage structure was not quite right, and the timescale progressions were too steep. That is why older workers are at a greater risk of losing their jobs during a turndown and other workers too, who had fixed wages.

So, we needed to make the timescales not so steep, and we also needed to make the wages more flexible. We started talking about flexi wage, started talking about wage restructuring. And by that time, Lim Boon Heng was also in the unions, and he was a tremendous support and helped us to carry through these quite difficult restructuring exercises. In crisis, you are dealing with serious problems. In non-crisis, the temptation is to say, "Nothing needs to be done. We are fine, and business is good. Why do we need to go for retraining? And why do we need to do this restructuring?" But it is when the business is good that you have a chance to do these things. And so, we went on, and there were other crisis which came along. The world economy is like that. And each time we had to come up with a playbook. Some, we can refer to previous playbooks. But each crisis is not quite the same. And each time the team is not quite the same. Because on our side, we have a new generation of ministers, or younger ministers taking over; those who are around are not so young already. And then on the union side, also new leaders and new Central Committee and new workers. And so, you have to keep on renewing that link, which we have done every time. The Asian Financial Crisis, Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and then, most recently, COVID-19. And now, after COVID-19, you sit back and relax, and you see, now AI is coming. We will say, well, the world is in turmoil, and we do not know what storms are coming. After COVID-19, we are strengthened, and we have to be prepared for something new. But we just do not know what yet. So that is the story of the last 40 something years.

NTUC: From the crisis, what were some of the hard lessons that you think that union leaders on the ground or even workers can take moving forward into the future?

SM: First of all, you (the leaders) must have a very good and long working relationship with them (the unions). If you start from scratch, it is very hard. In 1985, I did not have a very long working relationship with them. But Ong Teng Cheong had. Lim Boon Heng had been there, for five years already. And he had the Central Committee who had very experienced leaders who trusted him. And so, as a result, you are able to have a discussion where there is mutual trust. Because if there is no mutual trust, and I am explaining to you this logic, "and because of this, that will happen, because of that, this will happen." I can tell you many kinds of arguments, but in the end, you sit back, and you say, "Does he know what he is talking about? Does he have my interest at heart? Is he just selling me a line, or is this really, truly something which he is worried about and which he is rightly worried about?" And you do not have that. So you have to have the trust, then you must have a basic understanding of what does our prosperity depend on? And it depends on us being competitive. It depends on us working hard, depends on us connecting up with our region; with China, with India, with the world, and the developed countries. And then, what is it which we can do in order to maximise our chances? And how can we persuade workers that this is something sensible for them, which they ought to accept, and which they ought to support and work together, to get ourselves out of a difficult spot. Or work together to make sure that we do not get into a difficult spot.

You have to understand how the economy works. You have to understand what is happening in the world. But most of all, you must have a good rapport with the government, with the ministers. And the ministers must have the workers' interests at heart, which is why the symbiotic relationship is so important.

NTUC: With tripartism, there are usually three different agendas — workers’ agenda, employers’ agenda, government’s agenda. How did you get everyone to work together harmoniously all these years?

SM: Well, there is always an element of bargaining in this because when you are talking about wage settlements or collective agreements, the workers would like a bit more, they would like various benefits. The employers would like more flexibility, they would like to keep their costs down. And so you have to have a bargain in order to reach something which both sides accept and see that it is fair.

And again, that is something which happens not just once, but it happens over and over again. You know, you have a collective agreement, it is good for two years, three years, and every year you must discuss what is a bonus for this year. And after three years, we will have to sit down again, and hopefully more or less the same team is there, and we discuss again. So because we have been doing this a long time, and there is a track record, I think people are prepared to say, “I give you the benefit of the doubt. And I do not think – I do not believe – you are going to cheat me. And if we make a deal, if things turn out differently, you will still be there, I will still be there; we have a long enough relationship that we both want. If the situation changes and arrangements must be adjusted, we are prepared to be practical about it. And if things turn out much better than expected, well, then you have to share the benefits. If things turn out badly, we have to share the pain too.”

So what does it depend on? I think it depends on not just the top level having good relations – between the SNEF (Singapore National Employers Federation) and NTUC, or NTUC and MOM (Ministry of Manpower); but also at the union levels – with the companies; in the companies – where the employers and the employers understand that there is this relationship which is valuable to them. And the unions also feeling and understanding that when you have a problem, let us find some way to solve the problem without coming to blows. And it requires maturity and some restraint on both sides. Because if the employers are overly demanding and say, “under the CA (collective agreement) it is written like this”, or the employee says, “you know, I desperately need overtime now. Can you arrange something for me now?” Well, you can get away with it once, twice, but after that, the relationship is sour, then in the long term it is very bad. And because we have been able to keep it generally good for quite long, so there is trust, and it is maintained.

When other countries try to do this, it is very difficult for them to replicate. They can see how we do it, but it is very difficult for them to go back and say, “okay, let us do the same.” Between the employers and the workers, it is already different. With the government, it is also different because there are very few governments which are on good terms with both employers and the unions. You have a conservative or liberal, right-wing government, they are on the employers’ side generally, and they see the unions as really a cost and (it is) better (to) not (have) unions; you just negotiate with workers, or rather, you just offer the workers, “Take it or leave it.” On the workers’ side if you have a labour, a left-wing government, well, they are pro-worker, but their relations with employers are not so good. In America, every time we have a Democrat government administration, the economy may be booming, people may be doing fine, high growth, low inflation, low unemployment. But the companies and bosses always feel that the Democrat administration is not on their side. They are burdensome. They basically do not understand us. Basically, they are not for us. They regulate us – all kinds of rules and requirements and make it difficult for us to prosper. So even if the economy is prospering, they do not like the administration. Sometimes, on the other side with the Republicans, even if the economy does not work, they say “it is very good, these chaps are on our side.” So, it is not quite objective, but there is some reality in that divide, and I think with the way we have done

it, we have, to a considerable extent, avoided that. Which I think, for Singapore, is a good thing.

NTUC: Employers and labour leaders constantly change over the years. What does it take to maintain that relationship?

SM: It is a continuing effort. You have to work at it, you have to get to know each other, and the new generations have to get to know each other. Playing golf helps. There is a regular golf kakis game. Every Wednesday. But it is not just playing golf, it is also dealing with real problems and going through real challenges together. And after you have done it, then you know, you get a measure of the other person – whether he is sensible or not, whether he is reasonable or not, whether you can develop trust or not. And in a crisis like COVID-19, it happens very quickly. In a non-crisis, if you are dealing with, say, CPF withdrawal age, retirement age issues, it is longer. But you deal with a CPF problem and you negotiate an outcome, and then you finally have a plan and you implement it together. Then you both have a stake in the thing. It is like when two people get married and have children, then the children help to keep the marriage together in many cases.

NTUC: The workforce profile is changing, with people moving towards platform work and gig work. Could you share how the tripartite partners, like NTUC, are going to tackle the needs of this changing profile?

SM: Well, the traditional union represents an industry or a company. There is a certain coherence: everybody is doing the same thing and furthermore, there is a collective agreement. And so there is collective bargaining, and you have bargainable employees and non-bargainable employees.

But now even in that setting, your non-bargainable employees are getting more, because more and more people have become management. In the old days, the management was maybe 10, 20%; and then 80% of the workers are rank and file. But now (management) is maybe 50%, maybe even more. In that situation, I do not think we can say that the workers do not need support, do not need services, do not need guidance, do not need a place they can turn to for help.

And so, the unions have to find some way to be able to reach the professionals and the management levels, and in a way which can function. Because collective bargaining is fine when you are all on basically more or less the same wage, same scheme, and even bonuses – plus or minus one. You get one month; he gets one and a half months. There are some variations, a little bit like that. But when you are in management or a professional, it can vary enormously. Two-thirds of your salary may be bonuses, for example. And you cannot really bargain on behalf of everybody, because each one performs differently. So the wage bargaining is no longer the central element, but the labour management relations, the HR issues which come up, the welfare issues which come up, these have to be dealt with. And the training imperatives – you must put in the effort and ready the workers for the future. And in extremis¹, they will have restructuring, and you have retrenchments, which in any normal economy happens to some extent. Then you have to make sure that people are treated fairly. So even there, you have got a role, but you have to evolve in order to be able to support that role.

Then in the gig economy, where people are freelancing, where the employment relationship is not quite so tight, the question is, how do you make sure that the workers have their welfare

¹ In extreme circumstances.

looked after? And some of it is NTUC reaching out to them and helping them. One model could be the way you did it with taxi drivers for example. Taxi drivers were not really employees, they are kind of freelancers. And yet, you have a role for the taxi associations, helping them to make sure that they get a fair deal. When you come to gig workers, it is something similar. But with gig workers, we also found we needed to make legislation so that they would be protected, particularly for CPF and also for workmen's compensation, so they can be compensated when things go wrong. And we have some degree of influence on their wage levels. So, we have done that, we have passed the legislation. Now we will have to see how it works out, and then we will take it progressively from there. So it is partly the unions' work, and partly the employers must understand that there should be some framework for gig workers, and then the Government playing its role, must watch over it, and when necessary, make the legislation, make the framework, which we are doing.

NTUC: Why is there such an emphasis on training and upskilling today?

SM: Because we think that technology is advancing very fast and that the jobs will change very fast. You can see it in one lifetime. When I first came back to work, we all had typists all over our offices, even in combat units. And the company clerk or the battalion Chief Clerk is a very important person then, in charge of a whole army of typists. You want to print routine orders, somebody must be there to type it out. No clerk, no routine orders, everybody cannot go home. And today there is no such kind of responsibility anymore – everybody has to do their own thing. I mean, we are all on our own screens, own keyboards, and we communicate differently. If you want to call somebody, you do not necessarily go through the PA to go to the PA of the other one. Very often, I just WhatsApp him or her and vice versa. And then you ping, "Are you free? Okay, free. I will call you, then we talk." So, I become my own PA. So, what happens? I still have a PA. The PA does different things. The PA kind of becomes an office manager and makes sure that appointments are made, and arrangements do not clash with one another. And if you want to organise a meeting or a reception, well, you coordinate everybody and make judgments on how to balance off the different requirements.

So, in one generation the job has changed. I think there are fewer PAs now, more people do it on their own. And certainly, I think we have fewer clerks. But we do not have a lot of ex-clerks unemployed as a result. They were able to learn the new jobs, and they went on to new things. But the progression has not changed. It has not stopped because you are now doing a different sort of job.

But you have AI coming, more and more capable AI – which you can use to help you draft a letter, to help you put out a statement. And it is not bad. You have to vet through, but you can do that. If you want to translate, you can put it into a computer, and the translation is not bad. It is just two, three years ago, that we used to have regular letters in the newspapers complaining about how terrible these machine translations were, and you need people to be there. But the machine translations have improved considerably. And in the end, the people must understand the language and the stuff, but a lot of the work has gone to the computer, and the human beings are doing different work. So, I think that process is going to speed up, and if you are going to do different work, you must understand the AI enough to use it yourself, and then you must be able to go on to the next level – now I got all these tools, how can I be more productive? I can write better articles, I can service customers better, I can give them more info, better advice, better service. So how to do that? You cannot, you do not, automatically do that. Some of it I learn from my colleagues at work, but some of it, you should go and spend some time on courses, maybe even a long course in mid-career, and come back with new skills at a different level. I think that is a very important thing. There are a lot of countries where people are very anxious about this – about new jobs they are not able to do, and so they are resisting.

Next week, I am going to the Singapore Maritime Week. I am going to a conference and making a speech. I am telling them – one of the things we do in our port and our maritime industries is that we pay a lot of attention to training our people, to make sure that they upgrade, they do not get displaced and made redundant. The tower crane operator who used to be up in the tower crane – one man, one tower crane, one lunch box, (with) one pee pot, (the) whole day up there. Now he sits in an air-conditioned room, and he has got a panel of computers, and he is controlling four or five tower cranes remotely at the same time. And it is not the end of this. In the yard, it used to be you had people driving the yard cranes around. Now yard cranes all driverless, also remotely controlled. So how does it happen? It happened because we put a lot of effort into training the people, and therefore they welcome the technology, and therefore Singapore Port is efficient, therefore our business grows, so they have jobs. If you are like the longshoremen overseas, or port workers in the developed countries, quite often they strongly resist this because the employers have not made this effort. And as a result, their ports are held back, are less efficient, and the economy suffers, and their own jobs suffer. In the end, they do not end up with more longshoremen. In the end, you just end up with a business going elsewhere. If we do not do it properly, we will end up in that situation also, and we have a responsibility to the workers to make sure we take care of them.

NTUC: Why do you think union leaders need to continuously upgrade themselves? What are some of the key things they need to learn?

SM: Well, I suppose you must understand the labour management scene, that is basic. You have to understand how our economy is changing, because then you will know when something needs to be done, you can explain to workers why you cannot help it. If you cannot see the competition here, you must go to Da Nang, or you go to Shenzhen, or you go to Shanghai. You see it, and you come back, then you understand. I think our union leaders have been doing this, and when they come back, they are quite sobered by the competition. (This) does not mean that we are going to lose, but it means that we have to work hard. And I think that is an important part of it. You got to understand that environment, and I think you also have to understand the role of the unions in Singapore and how you can make a difference. Knowing all this theoretical knowledge is fine, but how can you make a difference, how can you be useful for your workers and win their trust? And how can you engage the government and the employers, and on that side, maintain trust too. That is partly knowledge, but it is also leadership.

You have the Ong Teng Cheong Labour Leadership Institute, that helps. I think that engagement with employers, with government, also helps. And it educates the employers and the government too on what the union realities are. Because otherwise you just make policies, and somebody has to make policies happen, the last mile has to work. And if your policies sound good, but when it comes to the workers, workers do not understand it or reject it, that is not going to do any good.

NTUC: Union leaders come from a more traditional rank-and-file base, but now they have to deal with PMEs. How can union leaders pivot to manage a more PME-based workforce?

SM: I think it is a delicate thing, the gap between the PMEs and the rank and file is not so wide as before. But even so, there is a difference in the preoccupations and the approach to issues, and you need a different style of leadership with them. And we are trying not to have a different PME union and a different worker level union, but to have it within one group, one organisation. But you need an organisation to be reflective of the workforce, and I think the people who are the union leaders have to have some empathy, both up and down in the hierarchy. So sometimes you have somebody come from management, but has a touch for HR, and if he

works in the unions that is good. Sometimes you have somebody who comes from rank and file, but he is a natural leader, and well, the employers respect him and find him very, very helpful. And hopefully they rise in their unions and make a broader contribution in the NTUC, like in the Central Committee.

NTUC: I think some people do not quite understand the significance of the NTUC-PAP symbiotic relationship and how it helps workers. Would you be able to explain it more simply?

SM: It is basically getting two for the price of one. Because you join a union, you get a government. You elect the Government, the Government works closely with the union leadership in order to make good things happen for workers in companies, in industries, and in the economy. And at the same time, we are able to do it in a way which keeps the economy growing and the employers accept that this is a good way to do things in Singapore. And people admire this, and we all benefit from that, and that does not happen in many places. There are other places where the unions have a political party which represents them; Australian Labour Party is like that, the British Labour Party is like that. But even in the countries where they have such a party and union relationship, when the union's party is in power, it is not able to have that position with the employers. And for that matter, with the whole government in order to take a national view and say, "I am doing this for the long-term good of Singapore." But at the same time, we make sure that the workers, their priorities and concerns are put up front and are not affected, not compromised. Of course, you must have give and take, but we will not do this at the expense of the workers. And we can do this, and we can do this for a long time.

In America, when you have Democratic government; they do one set of policies. You have a Republican government, you turn 180 degrees. Next term, if there is a Democratic government again, they may well turn 180 degrees again. Every few years, you have a drastic change of direction. It is very difficult for the country to work.

In UK, you have the same kind of thing. And in Europe, you have a spectrum of parties, the politics works a bit differently. Very often they will end up with a coalition, sometimes a very broad coalition. You got right wings, maybe centre, maybe left wing and then you form a government like in Germany. But there is not that degree of consensus and mutual agreement on what the objective is of the country, or what are the goals which we should set nationally. So when you have a broad coalition like that, far from all working together, you have gridlock. The Prime Minister disagrees with the Finance Minister, Finance Minister, there was a fight. As a result, you end up, in Germany's case, the Chancellor fought with his Finance Minister, ended up with new elections. I think that is not a good model. Our model of the symbiotic relationship and tripartism, brings everybody together. It makes sure the workers have unions which are taking care of them, and at the same time, have a government which is taking care of them. And the unions and the government working very closely together, which is very important.

NTUC: You have been working with the Labour Movement for decades. Who do you consider your greatest comrades?

SM: I talked about Ong Teng Cheong just now, Lim Boon Heng, Lim Swee Say, the Secretaries-General have been very critical. But at the grassroots level, people like Cyrille Tan, Nithiah Nandan, Nachiappan Sinniah, and there were senior leaders in many of the other unions like Ong Ah Heng, and you have got people in the transport union too, Fang Chin Poh. They are not all going to stand up and make you an eloquent speech, but they are very solid and reliable people. And if they have a problem, they tell you, you better take them seriously. And if they are standing with you, you can take a lot of comfort that they are doing it out of

conviction, and they will help you get things through. And some of these things are very difficult to get through.

Nachiappan, Nithiah and (others were) in UPAGE (Union of Power and Gas Employees), before that PUB Union, they had the DREs (daily-rated employees) before. Without them, we could not have restructured the electricity industry from being PUB and Electricity Department of the PUB, to having generators, to having the grid, to having a much more efficient and really lower-cost electricity service delivered to Singaporeans. It meant a lot of restructuring. It was painful, there was some job losses, but it needed to be done. We took time, we discussed it carefully with the union, and we got them onside, and they helped us to make the changes which were necessary. Same with the port workers, (like) Jessie Yeo. Now we look at it, it looks good, and the mega port is coming. But there were times when it ran into difficulties and we lost business, and we had to make some significant staff changes, (it was) very emotionally draining. But it was necessary, and the unions helped us, and we preserved many jobs as a result, and now we have been able to upgrade the jobs, I think there is a path forward. If we had not done that, we would have been in very serious trouble.

When you have this, they become friends. They are not just brothers and sisters; they are really very reliable friends for a long time.

NTUC: Past union leaders have played a role in setting the infrastructure of today. What is the role of the unions today to set the stage for the future?

SM: Training is a big part. You have the Devan Nair Institute for Employment and Employability, you have the LLI, we have e2i (Employment and Employability Institute) as well. So those are the formal places. But training in the companies, you have set up Company Training Committees (CTC). This is Brother Ng Chee Meng's initiative; I think it has taken off quite well. And this year we put more money into it in the Budget, because first of all, you have been able to spend the money and have good results. We see the results, and we are happy, because this is a way to get individual companies to move. Very often, it is not that they do not have money to move, but you need that impetus, that encouragement, and this is a signal that the Government is supporting this. And I put my money where my mouth is. So please make the effort. It gives the unions an opening to go and talk to the employers and to get the subject on the table and part of the collective discussions, negotiations.

And as a result, we have got over 3,000 CTCs now, and there will be more. And it is a continuing job. It is harder for the small companies, SMEs, because if I have 10 workers, how to have a CTC? If we go to the CTC meeting, (the) company must stop working. But for the bigger companies, it is important. For the smaller companies, we have to find ways to upgrade the workers and to help them to use technology which can benefit them. It is beginning to happen. If you go to a restaurant now. When first we went and had these productivity grants, when you went into a restaurant, what had happened? The paper menu has been replaced by an iPad menu. But now it is better, because now the iPad is not just a menu. You can actually click on the iPad or even better, they give you a QR code, you click on the QR code and you order, and the food will come. And at the end, you probably can do that and pay. I was on holiday in Japan. You go to a little restaurant, they also do it like that. In fact, you can go into a restaurant, and nobody comes to your table. You are supposed to do your own thing. When the food comes, it will come to your table, and when you leave, nobody came to ask us, either. Therefore, it is possible, even for small companies, even in the retail sector, F&B to use technology. They may need some help to get there, and I think we can help them to know how to incorporate it into their business.

I went for a walk at the Ang Mo Kio Central Market on the weekend. I found a hawker, one of the stallholders with mounds of seafood on ice outside his stores. I said, "Why are you putting this in the corridor?" So, he says, "oh, I am doing a live marketing."

So, I asked him, and he said two thirds of his business is online now. He told me he had two stalls and he is doing a good business. And a lot of it is not just locals online. He arranges for delivery, and he is making a living. And how did it start? During COVID-19 and after COVID-19, people have got used to doing it like this, and I think he will do more business than he could possibly do just by having one stall.

NTUC: Have you ever been inspired by a union leader's resilience, or have a fond memory of a union leader who defines a generation?

SM: I think Nithiah (Nandan) was remarkable. He was looking after the workers, even till he was very ill. He negotiated the last CA, shook hands, and then next day he died. They finished, they shook hands, and then they said to Nithiah, "When do we say goodbye?" He says, "Now. Shake hands." And he was very ill, he settled it, made sure the workers were looked after. He left in peace. It takes a lot of conviction to do that. So hopefully you have new generations like that.

NTUC: One of the IROs (industrial relations officers) shared about Brother Nachiappan. It was a very similar story when he was really ill. I think he said he called somebody even though he was in hospital. He said there were these four workers, and they need re-employment, please take care of them.

SM: Kumar (G Muthukumarasamy) was like that too.

NTUC: How can we build a generation of union leaders who were like that?

SM: If you go through COVID-19 and you are still not like that, there is nothing I can do. It comes from your exposure, your experience, the trials you have gone through, and you toughen. If you never experience it, I can lecture to you, you can learn about it, watch a video, but it is not the same. And for better or for worse, I think there will be enough challenges to toughen people up. I hope they get toughened up.

NTUC: You have been on the labour forefront for a long time. What would you say is your greatest achievement?

SM: No, not for me to say. We have kept the tripartite relationship alive, thriving. We have surmounted tribulations. We have made progress steadily, and today, I think the workers are better than they were 10 years ago. I think even five years ago, even despite COVID-19. COVID-19 set us back, hurt incomes, it hurt a lot of livelihoods, but we are coming up, and I think for many workers in your salaries today, your incomes today, your standard of living today – it is better than five years ago, certainly (better than) 10 years ago. Subjectively, it may not feel like that, because of quite high inflation. You see your wages go up 6% and then you see the prices go up 4%. But actually, you did not see 4%, all the parts which still were okay. Then your egg prices went up so much and you are shocked, or your noodle prices. And then you say, wow, my wage increase got eroded away, cost of living very high. So subjectively, people feel the pain, and I completely understand.

And there are also some workers, company may not be doing well, or maybe they are at the top of their wage scales. And they may not have had wage adjustments, and so they may have not caught up yet with where they were before COVID.

But on average, if you look at the typical worker and a typical family, I think they can get by, and I think more than get by. That is something which has not happened in many countries. But we have had that. And I think to be able to come out and to hold the trust and sustain it and have a good chance of keeping it going forward for some time with new leaders and new workers, I think it is not my achievement, but it is what we have done together in the tripartite partnership.

NTUC: What is your message to the union leaders on the ground in forging ahead towards the next few decades?

SM: For all our difficulties, we are in a stronger position than many other countries. In terms of our preparation of our people, in terms of our cohesion, in terms of our standing in the world. So as union leaders make the most of this and work with the Government and work with the workers, have your workers best interests at heart. You are not a union leader in order to get the elevation; if you go to the Central Committee, that is because you made a contribution, but you are not in this in order to get into the CC. You are in this because you think that Singaporean workers deserve to be well-led and deserve to be well taken care of and that is your job, just as the government has to have that conviction. If you are a Minister – that Singapore deserves to be well led, and it is our responsibility to do it, to the best of our ability.

NTUC: Besides the crises that you spoke about earlier, another potential challenge is the ageing workforce. What are your thoughts on senior workers' employment and employability?

SM: Well, if you look at the overall statistics, we are not doing badly. Quite a lot of people are working older. And the most encouraging thing in Singapore is that people want to work older, which in other countries is not. But in Singapore, because of the way our CPF works – it is yours, you get the CPF. you work older, you collect more CPF. People do want to work old, and I think the employers are accepting and they have no choice, because we do not have a surplus of workers. So, if the older worker is able to contribute, they should be willing to take him or continue employing him. To take a new, older worker afresh without knowing his history and without that experience in your company, that is harder, and we have to work at that. But if you are continuing in the company and you are productive and in good health, I think that we can make an adjustment, and we have to continue to do that. And the employers have to tune the job so that older workers can do it. And the older workers also must be prepared to make adjustments, because every year your hair goes a bit greyer. Every year, you are a little bit slower, a little bit less spry, still productive, but you know that your bones get pain a little bit more. And so there has to be adjustment in your responsibilities and also in your terms of employment. It may be shorter hours, it may be some adjustment to the pay. And we talk about it in principle, people say yes, but I know in practice, it is very hard to do. Emotionally, you do not want to think that I am not the same, and you are very reluctant to accept a bit less than last year. But I think we do have to do that, and I hope that eventually we accept, yeah, I am still contributing, but it is time for somebody younger to do what I used to do. I will do something not quite the same. Which is what I am doing.

NTUC: With technology changing so rapidly, how can union leaders continue to keep up with the pace of change?

SM: Make the most of SkillsFuture grants.

NTUC: Union leaders are union members too, so they also have UTAP (Union Training Assistance Programme).

NTUC: Is there anything else you wanted to add?

SM: But to just say, I am very honoured that the unions are giving me this award and a tremendous privilege to have worked with them. And I thank them from the bottom of my heart for their cooperation and support all these years, and I hope they give it to my successor as well.

NTUC: Thank you very much, SM.