

## **SPEECH BY MELVIN YONG (MP FOR TANJONG PAGAR GRC) AT THE FORTITUDE BUDGET DEBATE ON 4 JUNE 2020**

1. Mr Speaker, I stand in support of the Fortitude Budget.
2. My fellow Labour MPs have touched on, and others will continue to emphasise the importance of job creation, job matching, and the need to save jobs during this unprecedented period. My speech will focus on keeping our jobs and workplaces safe. Because failing to do so may result in another unwelcome spike in COVID-19 cases and undo all our efforts – and the billions of dollars that we have committed and are committing – to tide our nation through this crisis.

### **Good WSH practices more important than ever**

3. Mr Speaker, we must tread carefully as we ease the Circuit Breaker measures. In China, over a 100 million people face renewed lockdown in the North-eastern region. In Japan, Hokkaido suffered a second wave of coronavirus infections after lifting lockdown measures; while in South Korea, new clusters have formed quickly after lockdown restrictions were eased, forcing closures of more than 250 schools last week, just days after they re-opened. Is this a case of too much, too soon? Or too little, too late? With lives and livelihoods at stake, it is not an easy balance to make. But I would like to urge that we take a more careful and calibrated approach to prevent this from happening in Singapore.
4. Let me first highlight the challenges on the ground that threaten to derail our efforts towards a Safe Reopening, and propose some suggestions on how we can address them.

### **Evolving requirements and discrepancies in implementing safe management practices**

5. Mr Speaker, many businesses and their workers have been facing different requirements and different sets of instructions from different government agencies. Sometimes, new requirements are issued just days after an earlier set of instructions while other times, they see other businesses implementing these rules differently. The mandatory use of SafeEntry is one such example. Most companies practise the check-in function, but some do not require you to check-out when leaving the premises. Others provide a barcode reader to allow visitors to scan their NRIC as an alternative, but this is not practised universally.

6. Should Safe Management Measures be implemented based on principles or should they be prescriptive? On the ground, it seems that bosses prefer to implement based on principles; while staff who are tasked to implement the measures prefer a more prescriptive set of instructions for clarity and ease of implementation.
7. Whichever the approach, Safe Management Measures must not inadvertently cause poor safety at the workplace. While we can understand that the aim of these measures is to minimise unnecessary social gatherings at the workplace, some types of work do require clear communication and coordinated teamwork. Keeping a “safety distance” and speaking through a mask could result in unclear communication, which may lead to heightened risks of workplace accidents. For manual work that requires heavy lifting – for example in the construction or marine engineering sectors – wearing a mask could affect their physically demanding work.
8. Mr Speaker, poor implementation could also lead to risky outcomes. For example, we read last month that the safe distancing dividers on a lorry transport for workers were deemed “not sturdy enough” and could have caused more harm in the event of a traffic accident! I hope that the Ministry of Manpower can conduct regular reviews and inspections for high risk sectors and ensure that the Safe Management Measures are working as intended.

### **Costs of implementing safe management measures amid declining revenue**

9. Mr Speaker, cost may also be a factor for poor implementation of safe management practices. Many businesses are already reeling from the increasing costs of putting in place the ever-evolving set of protective measures to keep workplaces safe – providing thermometers and masks, increasing the frequency of cleaning and disinfection, employing additional staff to control access and monitor temperature, even increasing the number of trips to ferry workers because of safe distancing requirements. Coupled with a sharp decline in revenue, businesses are hit with a double whammy!
10. Many employers that I spoke to are now concerned about the costs for their workers to undergo swab tests as we continue to ramp up community testing. Today, construction workers are required to be tested every two weeks while pre-school and nursing home staff have taken a precautionary test before returning to work. The cost of a swab test seems to vary significantly. Online checks reveal that they can range between \$1 USD in Senegal to more than \$3,000 USD in America!

### **Dangerous solutions to keep workplaces “safe”**

11. To manage costs, many businesses are leveraging technology to make our workplaces safer during this pandemic. In China, AI-powered thermal cameras are used to identify those in a crowd who have a fever, and facial-recognition systems are deployed widely to identify those not wearing masks. Some isolation wards in China are entirely manned by robots that take the patient’s temperature, provide food and medicine, and perform disinfection tasks. We too have deployed similar robots at our community isolation facilities in Singapore.
12. However, I am deeply concerned that some businesses are marketing products that may end up doing more harm than good. For example, we read that the use of disinfectant tunnels can cause serious harm to those walking through them. Experts have cautioned against atomising and spraying copious amount of disinfectant on a person as this may cause irritation and potentially irreversible damage to the cornea, skin, and our respiratory system. Other products, which could cause prolonged UV light exposure, are also harmful to the human body. I urge the Government to review and where necessary, stop the use of such unsafe interventions at our workplaces.

### **Reinvent and embrace permanent WFH solutions**

13. Mr Speaker, until we find a vaccine or an effective treatment for COVID-19, we should incentivise companies to embrace remote working solutions. Many have adapted to working from home in the past two months, and I encourage companies to use this opportunity to reinvent their business operations, embrace work-from-home arrangements permanently, and seize the new opportunities that come with this new normal.
14. Our hawkers and wet market stallholders have shown that this is possible. During the Circuit Breaker, many hawkers have united to embrace e-commerce and food delivery. IMDA also taught stallholders from Tekka Market how to sell their produce using Facebook Livestream. Today, many stallholders have started to livestream on their own. The reinvention of our wet market stallholders to become “web market superstars” shows us that we can all adapt to, and seize opportunities in this new normal.

### **Mental health challenges facing our workforce**

15. Mr Speaker, beyond employers, workers too are facing increased levels of stress. Graduating students and retrenched workers are finding it hard to find a job. Matured workers are worried about keeping their jobs; and frontline workers fear getting an infection from prolonged exposure. Even young parents are struggling between balancing their work, helping their children with home-based learning and taking care of their restless elderly parents.
16. Having a mentally healthy workforce is important as compliance to safety may be compromised if workers are not able to focus at work. The total expenditure on mental health makes up less than 5% of MOH's annual operating expenditure. Within the population, Singapore has an average of 4.4 psychiatrists for every 100,000 people. This figure is much lower than the 15 psychiatrists per 100,000 recorded by most OECD countries. I therefore urge the Government to invest more resources on mental healthcare as insufficient support could lead to dire consequences especially in this prolonged period of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear.
17. Mr Speaker, COVID-19 has shone the spotlight on good WSH practices. Companies are now required to appoint Safe Management Officers (SMOs) before they can resume work, and NTUC has already trained over 1,700 to be SMOs. We aim to double that number in the coming months. I hope that the Government could revisit my numerous proposals to mandate a WSH representative in every company. Let us retain and expand the role of SMOs beyond the pandemic, so that our workplaces can be safer, and our workers healthier.

### **Rally together to emerge stronger**

18. Mr Speaker, we are only as strong as the weakest link. To tide through this pandemic and emerge stronger, we need to rally together as one people. The Government has done much to protect lives and livelihoods through an unprecedented series of four Budgets over four months. Businesses are putting in place measures to keep workplaces safe. The onus is on each of us to take care of ourselves and to take care of each other as we resume "Business Unusual".
19. I call on the Government, employers and workers to continue to partner with the Labour Movement so that together, we can save jobs, and keep jobs safe – because every worker matters!
20. I support the Budget.