

# ntuc this week

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## Simply Something Special

**T**ime has proven the effectiveness of the Skills Programme for Upgrading and Resilience, the Budget Resilience Package, Jobs Credit scheme and other measures introduced from December 2008 to tackle the world economic downturn.

"While there was some uncertainty whether they would work, by now most people will agree that it really helps to stave off retrenchments as otherwise the numbers would have gone very much higher," said guest-of-honour Education Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen at the third run of The Singapore Manual & Mercantile Workers' Union Tripartite Initiative forum on 5 June 2009.

Although about 94,000 workers are committed to training under SPUR, SMMWU Secretary-General and NTUC President John De Payva pointed out that with a resident workforce of above 1.8 million there is still a lot of untapped potential. With more than 1,000 courses currently available, he called on senior management and HR practitioners to cast their nets wider.

"I urge you to work closely with SMMWU to adopt the Tripartite Guidelines on Managing Excess Manpower and find ways to cut costs to save jobs, not cut jobs to save costs. You should also take advantage of the Government subsidies under SPUR to send your workers for training and prepare your workforce for the eventual upturn," said Mr De Payva.

The Jobs Credit scheme, said Dr Ng who was Manpower Minister from 2004 to 2008, did more than provide employers with a buffer and easing cash flow: "The difference is not only cash flow but confidence. If they didn't have the cash flow, it would have reduced their confidence to hold on to workers. Many of them are thinking: 'If there is going to be an upturn in 2010, then if I retrench now I have to spend more money re-hiring. I had better send them for training, take advantage of SPUR, hold on to them even though there are less orders, train them



Making A Point... Education Minister Dr Ng Eng Hen (centre) flanked by (from far left) Singapore National Employers Federation Executive Director Koh Juan Kiat, SMMWU President Richard Kang, SMMWU Secretary-General John De Payva and Ministry of Manpower Labour Relations Divisional Director Ong Yen Her.

and then get through this rough patch'.

"All these programmes by themselves may not make great effect, but together they have staved off retrenchments. That is very important as we have responded. In fact, somebody said to me: 'I think you responded too strongly. People are getting a bit complacent'. But I said never mind, that is a good problem, we can address that. Whatever it is, it has given confidence."

To show how the joint efforts of the tripartite partners is not something that can be replicated anywhere, Dr Ng recalled one question that is always asked everywhere he speaks with business, union or Government leaders: "One aspect of Singapore that has always stood out is the way we tackle problems. They ask us how do you manage SARS, how do you manage the economic downturn, why is it you are so quick to respond to problems?"

As it takes time to explain the system, "I just basically say to them the Secretary-General of the largest union NTUC is a Cabinet Minister. They look at me, I look at them, then they think again and they look at each other. And then I will purposely say something else and they come back to me and ask: 'Can you tell me a little bit more about that?' They cannot understand how NTUC is in Cabinet. Most of the time, they say they will go back and study this or they will say if you put a union leader in Cabinet, Cabinet cannot function."

"There is something very special which allows us to respond as Singapore United and our tripartism is our secret weapon. We can sit down calmly with employers, unionists and Government to see what is the best way forward."



By  
Marcus Lin

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NTUC SEs  
Strike Out  
Against  
Slump