

IDEOLOGICAL AND ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES AMONG SINGAPORE TRADE UNION LEADERS¹

NOELEEN HEYZER, PETER D. WELDON, AND WEE GEK SIM

Introduction

TRADE UNIONS IN SINGAPORE OVER THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS HAVE been characterized by intense anti-colonial activity, hundreds of major strikes, violence, major political involvement, and more recently, docility. In this same period Singapore has been a colony, a colonial territory with home rule, a part of Malaysia and since 1965, an independent nation. The political history of Singapore and the history of its trade unions are, of course, intertwined and while the former is becoming increasingly well documented,² the latter lies for the most part in newspapers, union pamphlets, and in the minds of the men who have led the unions.³ The history of trade unions is by no means dead, since there are more than 100,000 members on the books of trade unions today in Singapore.⁴

This paper is concerned with the attitudes of present trade union leaders towards a variety of issues related to the integration of unions in Singapore. The study of these attitudes should enable greater comprehension and possibly prediction of the behaviour of present-day trade union leaders. It is impossible, however, to evaluate these attitudinal patterns without some understanding of the history of trade unions in Singapore, particularly since this history is so recent.

¹ This paper is partially based on Noeleen Heyzer and Wee Gek Sim, *Survey of Trade Unions in Singapore*, an unpublished academic exercise submitted in 1971 to the University of Singapore as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Social Science. Gratitude is expressed to the Asia Foundation for support of the exercise and to John MacDougall for his assistance in questionnaire construction and data analysis.

² See, for example, Pang Cheng Lian, *Singapore's People's Action Party* (Singapore and Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Thomas J. Bellows, *The People's Action Party of Singapore: Emergence of a Dominant Party System* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1970).

³ The exceptions are M.R. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970); Charles Gamba, *The Origins of Trade Unionism in Malaya* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Ltd., 1962); Teddy Lim Khok Chuan, "The Trade Union Movement in Singapore," in National Trades Union Congress, *Why Labour Must Go Modern* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1970), pp. 48-53; W.E. Chalmers and Pang Eng Fong, "Industrial Relations" in Ooi Jin-Bee and Chiang Hai-Ding, *Modern Singapore* (Singapore: University of Singapore, 1969), pp. 109-126.

⁴ The most recent official figures come from the Ministry of Labour, *Annual Report, 1969* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1970).

Historical Background

Even before World War II "it was officially estimated that in 1941 there were in Singapore 51 registered associations of employees which exercised trade union functions and which were recognized by employers for bargaining purposes and there were probably many more which were not registered."⁵ Many of these unions actively participated in resistance activities, trade union members forming an important part of the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (M.P.A.J.A.); both this army and the trade unions were dominated by the Malayan Communist Party (M.C.P.). In fact, it was often impossible to differentiate between the M.C.P., M.P.A.J.A. and General Labour Union (G.L.U.) members.

The economic situation in the immediate post-war period was extremely bad and it was not difficult for the G.L.U. to call on even non-members for support of their strikes and pickets. This support was strengthened by what can only be regarded as heavy-handed rule by the British Military Administration (B.M.A.) and its employment of Japanese Surrendered Personnel to replace those workers on strike.⁶ Various strikes were called during 1945 with a major strike set for 15th February 1946 to be accompanied by the inauguration of the Pan-Malayan General Labour Union. The B.M.A. arrested twenty-four major union leaders, dealing a blow to both the immediate strike and the long range plans of the M.C.P. No longer was cooperation with the B.M.A. to be possible.

The Pan-Malayan G.L.U. turned increasingly to the strike and in the year following 1 April 1946, 1,173,000 man-days were lost in Singapore as a result of strikes, an average loss of more than ten days per employee.⁷ These strikes were not generally called as part of any planned union action for better wages or conditions, but served rather to build up the organizational strength of union structure. There were certainly gains made for the workers; this was often also true in the case of non-G.L.U. unions, whose members were assisted by volunteers from the G.L.U. Building goodwill among the workers, "the Pan-Malayan G.L.U. became, in the course of 1946, a genuinely popular movement."⁸ Those ready to condemn the G.L.U. as a M.C.P. front organization should not forget that "most Singapore workers seem to have gained some or all of the standard G.L.U. demands, including wage increases, medical benefits, sick pay, overtime pay, longer holidays, better housing, improved gratuities, greater security of employment and less arbitrary promotion or dismissal procedures."⁹

⁵ Stenson, *op. cit.* pp 34-35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73; Gamba, *op. cit.*, Chapter II.

⁷ Stenson, p. 104.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Much of this organizational success had taken place at a time when government supervision of trade union activity was not severe. A new post of Trade Union Adviser was created and the pre-war Trade Unions and Industrial Courts Ordinances were brought into force. The Singapore G.L.U. was reorganized as the Singapore Federation of Trade Unions (S.F.T.U.), but still registration was carried out very slowly and by March 1947, only twenty unions had been registered in Singapore.¹⁰ However, employers, who had been slow in returning to Malaya and Singapore after the war, were now becoming better organized and were putting pressure on the government for more severe regulation of trade union activity. The results of this pressure were increased activity on the part of government and a drop in the number of man-days lost to 205,000 in the year April 1947 to March 1948 in Singapore.¹¹ The situation has been described well by Stenson while referring to the S.F.T.U.: "Its leaders were indeed correct when they asserted that reformism had failed, but they did not appreciate how completely it had failed nor how much the balance of forces between employers, government, and unions had altered in the brief space of one year."¹²

After 1948, trade unionism in Singapore entered a phase of inactivity which lasted till 1950 and the organization of the Singapore Trade Union Congress; the Congress was organized by English-educated leaders in contrast to the pre-1950 trade union activity which was led by vernacular-educated Chinese and Indians. The English-educated were ideologically and linguistically closer to the government than the previous trade union leaders had been; the new leaders tended to be overwhelmingly white collar, again, a contrast to the previous blue collar leaders.

Despite the difference in leadership structure between the forties and the fifties, Singapore trade union activity in the latter period did increase and by 1956, 157,216 workers were unionized, more than ever before.¹³ The struggle for political power in Singapore during this period involved the trade unions with the People's Action Party's P.A.P. strength based on the militant unions. Leadership was divided "between the mainly vernacular-educated, militant socialists, M.C.P. sympathizers or cadres such as Lim Chin Siong, Fong Swee Suan, James Puthuchear, and S. Woodhull and the English-educated moderate socialists such as Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye and S. Rajaratnam."¹⁴ In August 1957 these left-wing leaders were arrested by the colonial government, strengthening the hand of the moderate leaders. While the P.A.P. fought for their release, the men were never restored to the party's good graces nor

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 220.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

did they ever receive cadre membership.¹⁵ These same leaders eventually split from the P.A.P., forming in mid-1961 the Barisan Sosialis party; some of them were imprisoned again, this time by the P.A.P. government in 1963; many have been released, but some of the left-wing leaders remain in jail today.¹⁶

The National Trades Union Congress (N.T.U.C.) was established in late 1964, succeeding the S.F.T.U. in which a split had occurred, similar to that which took place within the P.A.P. The N.T.U.C. is the only registered federation of trade unions in Singapore today and receives an annual allocation from the government. Many of the left-wing unions which were active in the fifties and early sixties have been deregistered by government. The period from 1964 to the present may be said to be one of transition, when the labor movement was beginning to reconcile itself to the national need for the industrial peace and economic development.

The Employment Act was passed in 1968 as one of a series of steps taken by the government to stabilize the labour situation in Singapore and ensure an attractive climate for foreign investors. Instead of curbing wage increases, this legislation sought to wage cost through restrictions on bonuses, retrenchment benefits and overtime. A large array of labor issues relating to job security was transferred to the employers' prerogative.

With the passage of this legislation, the only issue of significance that remains negotiable is that of wage rates. However, trade unions are unable to have any significant impact on wage rates as the basic wage structure is invariable, and is incorporated into the next collective agreement when the present one expires. The trade unions have been passing through a state of impotence and lethargy, resulting in apathy and a decline in membership strength.¹⁷

The N.T.U.C. union leaders decided that this trend could not be allowed to continue. What is required to rectify the status quo is a new approach to trade unionism, a re-education of union membership that a trade union has a much wider variety of roles to play besides the traditional ones. A modernization programme was proposed by the N.T.U.C. in a four day seminar in late 1969 and the various papers have been compiled into a book, *Why Labour Must Go Modern?*

¹⁵ Bellows, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Pang, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-18.

¹⁷ For the official N.T.U.C. presentation of this legislation, see Choo Eng Khoo, "Employment Legislation," and Chue Shui Hoong, "Employment Legislation — (Addendum)," in National Trades Union Congress, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-75 and 75-89 respectively. For more critical commentary, see David B. Johnson, "The New Labour Legislation: Remedy or Retrogression?," *Suara Ekonomi*, January 1969, pp. 21-28; Robert Quek Sio Chua, "Industrial Relations and Labour Legislation in Singapore," *Suara Ekonomi*, May 1970, pp. 8-16, and "Employment Act — A Comment," *Suara Ekonomi*, January 1969, pp. 25-27.

The briefness of this history does not give just and full coverage to the extremely complex changes which took place within Singapore trade unions in the fifties and the sixties. Hopefully, however, it provides an indication of the extent of the leadership and ideological crises which have faced trade unions over the last twenty-five years. As the attitudes of the present-day trade union leaders are examined, the events of the past cannot be overlooked.

The Sample

In July 1970 there were 105 registered trade unions; 39 of these were affiliated with the N.T.U.C., leaving a majority of the unions, 66 with no federation affiliation. Secretary-Generals of all unions were included in the study, but for the reasons shown in Table 1, 10% of the Secretary-Generals of the affiliated unions and 23% of the Secretary-Generals of the non-affiliated unions could not be interviewed, giving an overall completion rate of 82%. From Table 1 differences in the reasons for the non-completion of interviews reflect some of the trade union history already outlined. Three of the Secretary-Generals of the non-affiliated unions remain in jail under political detention and six of them refused to be interviewed. These reasons are in contrast to those applicable to the Secretary-Generals of the affiliated unions, who were not interviewed.

TABLE 1
REASONS FOR NON-COMPLETION OF INTERVIEW

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Affiliate</i>	<i>Non-Affiliate</i>
Could not be contacted after three visits	8	4
Away from Singapore	2	1
Home address could not be located	0	1
Under political detention	0	3
Refused	0	6
Total % not interviewed	(10%)	(23%)

The unions in the sample are representative of the unions in Singapore, regardless of affiliation status, as indicated in Table 2. Additionally though the N.T.U.C. affiliated unions are smaller in number, they include a majority of organized workers. There are no population check data available on the Secretary-Generals of unions in Singapore, but it is assumed that the sample of these leaders is as representative as the union sample.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF ALL UNIONS AND SAMPLE UNIONS BY
BOOK MEMBERSHIP (%)

Size	Affiliate Unions	Affiliate Sample	Non-Affiliate Unions	Non-Affiliate Sample
Under 100	10	12	18	18
100 to 249	31	31	46	44
250-999	26	20	28	28
999-4999	28	31	8	10
5000 and above	5	6	0	0
Total	(39)	(35)	(66)	(51)

The Study

A series of attitudinal questions were formed from depth interviews with some leaders of both affiliated unions and non-affiliated unions of the N.T.U.C. These interviews focused on three issues, believed to be relevant to the future development of the labour movement in Singapore:

- 1) the role of trade unions in society;
- 2) the labour laws in Singapore;
- 3) the modernization effort of N.T.U.C.

The questions were administered to each of the Secretary-Generals in the language preferred by the respondent. This involved the translation of these questions into Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Malay; back-translation into English was also performed to insure the accuracy of the translation.

A Likert, five point response pattern of strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree, was used; several reversals were included to preclude response set. For purposes of analysis questions were grouped under key conceptual areas; each question was then cross-tabulated with a typology described below. If the cross-tabulations were in the expected direction, an overall composite scale of the items was constructed and a mean score was computed; all items were found to scale.

The basic independent variable was a typology of trade union leaders, constructed with the history of trade unions in Singapore as the guide. The first group in the typology was labelled the "policy makers" of the N.T.U.C. and includes: the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary-General, the Secretary for Organization and Administration, the Secretary for Research and Training and two central committee members. The first five persons obviously hold official positions of authority within the trade union federation; the two committee members were included

as "policy makers" because they fulfilled at least two of the following criteria:

- a) was a top union official in the last central committee;
- b) had been public spokesman for union policies during 1970;
- c) was on the organizing committee of at least two major N.T.U.C. activities.

The second group included Secretary-Generals on the central committee of the N.T.U.C., who represent their affiliated unions on this committee; there were thirteen such unions and Secretary-Generals. The third group is composed of twenty-two Secretary-Generals of affiliate unions, which are not represented on the Central Committee of the N.T.U.C. The fourth group includes twenty Secretary-Generals of unions, which are not affiliated with the N.T.U.C., but whose Secretary-Generals indicated that they are considered affiliating. Finally there were thirty-one Secretary-Generals, whose unions had no intention whatsoever of affiliating with the N.T.U.C.

In interpreting findings involving this typology it must be kept in mind that the size of each of the five groups is small, particularly the first two groups, the policy makers of the N.T.U.C. and the affiliate representatives on the N.T.U.C. Central Committee. Despite this limitation the five groups are seen as distinct in their relationship to the "establishment" trade union organization in Singapore; attitudinal differences are projected as linked to these distinctions, particularly on issues which touch on official trade union policy.

With these very general guidelines let us now examine some of the results. The first scale has been labelled "union responsibility for society" and includes four items:

a) "Trade unions have a responsibility to do whatever possible for the jobless and the potential job seeker of the future besides servicing their members.

b) Trade unions should prove especially uncooperative to foreign investments because the latter are not here for the good of Singapore. (reversal)

c) The acceptance by certain unions of the Employment Act and the Industrial Relations Ordinance means that the trade union movement has forsaken its commitment to protect the rights of workers. (reversal)

d) The demands of society as a whole take precedence over the claims of the workers."

The range of the union responsibility scale is from 20 (strong agreement) to 4 (strong disagreement) with the scoring technique adjusted for the reversals. The mean scores for each of the groups are shown in Table 3. Three groupings are clear from the distribution of the scores with the overall distribution as anticipated: those closer

to the establishment score highest on union responsibility for society. Somewhat surprising is the similarity of the scores of those affiliates who do not have representation on the N.T.U.C. central committee and those non-affiliates who intend to affiliate. The former group had been expected to score much like the other groups of affiliates. The extreme positions of the policy-makers and the hard-core non-affiliates are clear.

TABLE 3

MEAN SCORES OF TRADE UNION LEADERS ON A SCALE OF
UNION RESPONSIBILITY FOR SOCIETY

Policy makers of N.T.U.C.	17.2
Affiliates represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	17.0
Affiliates not represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	15.4
Non-affiliates with intention of affiliation	15.5
Non-affiliates with no intention of affiliation	11.7

The next set of questions was concerned more specifically with the labor laws themselves to which previous reference has been made:

"a) For the vast majority of workers, over three-quarters of whom are not in any union at all, the new labor laws mean an improvement in their working conditions.

b) The labor laws are go-ahead licenses to deprive the workers of what is rightfully theirs. (reversal)

c) The labor laws give management absolute power and a completely free hand in dealing with the employees, without any real safeguard for the interest and welfare of the workers. (reversal)

d) The labor laws are attempts to tackle the problem of finding jobs for over a hundred thousand forgotten and largely inarticulate group of unemployed citizens.

e) The labor laws are designed to further enrich the rich at the expense of the poor. (reversal)

f) The new labor laws are made because the workers should cooperate with the government to attract foreign investors to build more factories here and to provide more jobs."

The range here is from 30 (strong agreement with the latest labor laws in Singapore) to 6 (strong disagreement) and the mean scores can be seen in Table 4. The difference between the two extreme groups is greater here than in the previous table and there is a distinction between affiliates not represented on the N.T.U.C. central committee and those non-affiliates with intention of affiliation. The non-affiliates take a much stronger stand against the labor laws than do the affiliates, and even within this latter group, there is a clear difference between those with and those without central committee representation.

TABLE 4
MEAN SCORES OF TRADE UNION LEADERS ON A SCALE OF
ATTITUDES TOWARD LABOR LAWS

Policy makers of N.T.U.C.	24.5
Affiliates represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	24.5
Affiliates not represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	21.4
Non-affiliates with intention of affiliation	17.7
Non-affiliates with no intention of affiliation	13.4

The next three series of questions are concerned with the modernization program proposed by the N.T.U.C. The questions which follow indicate the content of this program and no further details will be presented. The first series of questions is concerned with the concept of modernization as formulated by the N.T.U.C., though no specific mention of the N.T.U.C. is made in any of the questions:

"a) Modernization is the realization that there must be a steady increase in national wealth before workers can have an increased share of it.

b) Modernization is a plot to perpetuate P.A.P. control of unions and workers. (reversal)

c) Modernization is the emergence of a tripartite partnership among workers, employers and the government.

d) Modernization is an escape from the real confrontation with the capitalist class which exploits the workers. (reversal)

e) Modernization is a conspiracy to further enslave the workers of Singapore and place them at the tender mercies of the reactionaires and imperialists. (reversal)

f) Modernization is the process by which the labor movement lays for itself the economic foundation of real social power and influence."

The second series of questions has to do with the rationale for modernization; this would seem tied to the concept itself, although it was thought that there might be greater agreement about the concept, but not about the rationale for implementation. The questions related to the rationale were as follows:

"a) It is necessary for new style trade unionists to think out ways and means of how workers can get a greater share of capital without slowing down the rate of development.

b) The clamor for modernization betrays the utter failure of the N.T.U.C.; it is an open, reluctant admission of its being a sham and self-serving organization. (reversal)

c) The modernization program is old ideology in new clothes and irrelevant to problems faced by workers today. (reversal)

d) The labor movement must acquire self-sufficiency in financial and human resources and a self-generating capacity for growth."

It should be noted that the second item above specifically mentions the N.T.U.C. in contrast to the previous set of questions. The third set of questions is related to the methods or means for bringing about modernization and includes the following:

"a) Unions and their representatives must be uncompromising in looking after labor's own interests in all negotiating bodies which include government and management.

b) The organization of sit-down strikes whenever union demands can be won by them. (reversal)

c) The formation of an effective joint consultative machinery for workers' participation in management.

d) The organization of more courses in industrial relations particularly in work study, union laws and advocacy for rank and file members so that they would be able to negotiate at branch level.

e) The establishment of a workers' Co-operative Commonwealth through life insurance, housing, servicing, consumer and producer co-operatives and a workers' bank.

f) A strategy of militant agitation for the total repeal of all undemocratic restrictive and repressive labor laws." (reversal)

In Table 5 the mean scores of the trade union leaders on the three composite measures are shown; though the ranges of each dimension are not the same, it can be clearly seen that the rank order of the leaders is consistent across all three dimensions. The difference between the extreme groups, the policy makers and the non-affiliates with no intention of affiliation is greatest along the rationale dimension; both the concept and the methods of modernization seem more acceptable than the rationale to the non-affiliates. The difference between affiliates with and without representation on the central committee also can be seen in this table, an indication of the level of consensus within the N.T.U.C. affiliated unions.

TABLE 5
MEAN SCORES OF TRADE UNION LEADERS ON SCALES
RELATED TO MODERNIZATION

	<i>Concept</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Methods</i>
Policy makers of N.T.U.C.	26.8	19.5	25.1
Affiliates represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	26.0	19.2	25.0
Affiliates not represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	24.6	17.8	24.0
Non-affiliates with intention of affiliation	20.3	15.9	22.4.
Non-affiliates with no intention of affiliation	18.6	12.0	19.4

The final series of questions has to do with the Secretary-Generals' attitudes towards co-operatives as a form of organization for improving the lots of workers. Co-operatives have been advocated by the N.T.U.C. in its program of modernization; it is believed, however, that the concept of co-operatives at the time of the survey was not identified as a N.T.U.C. program. Rather co-operatives had a neutral image, and for this reason, the series of questions about co-operatives is treated separately from those regarding modernization.

There were ten questions touching on the subject of co-operatives:

"a) The improvement of the workers' lot does not depend on co-operatives but on progressive trade unions. (reversal)

b) Co-operatives destroy individual ownership, initiative, and responsibility. (reversal)

c) Co-operatives reduce the cost of living for workers.

d) Co-operatives would lead to the widening of Singapore's economy by adding a workers' co-operative sector to the government and private sectors.

e) As a framework of organized mutual aid, the co-operative structure seems a most efficient tool for the training of manpower.

f) Co-operatives in Singapore would not improve the workers' condition to any significant extent (reversal)

g) The formation of capital is easier and more rapid in a co-operative enterprise, if properly established and managed, than in a personal enterprise.

h) Co-operatives are unfeasible in Singapore, because people are not sufficiently sophisticated. (reversal)

i) Conflicting interests due to a heterogenous population would lead to the co-operatives' disintegration.

j) Co-operation ensures that economically weak people will be strong if they unite and co-ordinate their efforts."

The mean scores with a potential range from 10 to 50 are shown in Table 6. The results are similar to those seen in the last two tables; the rank order remains consistent. There is a marked difference between those affiliates with and without central committee representation. The difference between the extreme groups compares with the difference along the dimensions of the concept and methods of modernization, not as extreme as that found for the rationale of modernization scale.

If the various concepts measured by these scales reflect the degree of consensus or attitudinal integration of trade union leaders in Singapore, then it seems clear that there are major differences between these leaders. Some of these divisions reflect the historical development of trade unionism in Singapore, which has seen a split between unions affiliated to a federation acceptable to government and those which have chosen to remain independent. Within these non-affiliated unions, there are

differences between those who are contemplating affiliation with the N.T.U.C. and those who are not, the position of the Secretary-Generals in the former often nearer to that of their colleagues in the affiliated unions which do not have representation on the N.T.U.C. central committee. There are important differences within N.T.U.C. unions with those Secretary-Generals without representation on N.T.U.C. central committee taking a more negative attitudinal position on most issues.

TABLE 6
MEAN SCORES OF TRADE UNION LEADERS ON A SCALE
OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS CO-OPERATIVES

Policy makers of N.T.U.C.	42.3
Affiliates represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	41.1
Affiliates not represented on N.T.U.C. central committee	39.4
Non-affiliates with intention of affiliation	36.4
Non-affiliates with no intention of affiliation	33.6

These various differences are not consistent across all issues; the greatest of them is between the N.T.U.C. policy makers and the affiliates with N.T.U.C. central committee representation, and the group of non-affiliates who have no intention of affiliating with the N.T.U.C. These differences are most severe on the issues of labor laws in Singapore, union responsibility for society, and rationale for modernization. They are less severe on the issues of co-operatives, the concept of modernization and the methods of modernization. The former issues have a greater ideological content and the latter are more related to action or strategy; clearly the former reflect traditional historical trade union differences in Singapore. These differences are not likely to disappear without radical changes in leadership and ideology. It is possible, however, that greater consensus among trade union leaders can be achieved in the area of strategy, since differences here are not as great as the ideological divisions. Given the impact of trade union history and the close, interdependent relationship between the N.T.U.C. and government, even the attainment of consensus concerning strategy may be difficult. Finally, it should be pointed out that nearly three-quarters of Singapore's labor force remains non-unionized; in the light of the differences pointed out above, a concerted organizational effort of this mass of workers will be difficult to mount and implement.