

A smoother industrial relations climate translates into a more harmonious relationship between employers and workers, which ironically results in workers thinking they don't need unions to preserve that state of affairs.

Mr Tan Soon Yam, the former general secretary of the Food, Drinks and Allied Workers Union, recalls joining the unions in the early 1960s when industrial strife was common, to fight for higher wages and a better life.

Says the 66-year-old: "Unemployment was high and salaries were low. We just wanted to have a better life."

Mr Bobby Tay, 53, deputy general secretary of the Singapore Bank Employees' Union, observes: "The irony is that the success of the union dilutes our role."

"We have been so successful in protecting workers' rights over the years that people no longer see the need for unions."

## Fighting back

DECLINING union membership is indeed a worldwide trend.

For instance, there were 15.7 million unionised workers in the United States in 2003. It dropped to 15.4 million within a year.

The number of union members in Australia fell by 26 per cent between 1988 and 2003.

In Singapore, however, NTUC seems to buck the global trend.

Membership figures have doubled in the last decade to 450,000

**NOT JUST A CLUB:** An NTUC membership now often means great leisure deals such as biking, nature expeditions, rafting and dragonboat racing. But NTUC secretary-general Lim Boon Heng believes union membership based merely on social benefits might not be sustainable.

members. But the rise is due to a scheme called the "general branch" membership.

It was introduced in 1992 to increase the pool of people who can join unions, such as those working in non-unionised companies. Those who left or are laid off from unionised companies can also stay on as a general branch member.

They are entitled to social benefits received by all union members, like holiday chalet bookings and rebates at supermarket cooperative FairPrice.

But they are not covered under any collective agreement negotiated by the union. They can turn to the NTUC for advice on employment if there is a dispute, but in most circumstances they cannot be represented by a union representative.

An ordinary branch member, on the other hand, can be represented by his union in a dispute with employers.

Still, the general branch membership has proven to be a hit, accounting for almost half, or 45 per cent, of NTUC members. Most of them are younger members, below 40 years.

Business undergraduate Faye Chiam, 20, picked up a membership brochure a few months ago

and was persuaded to join because of all the discounts on movies and travel.

"These are great and it's only eight bucks a month," she gushes.

## Needs binding factor

WHILE "general branch" membership and the lure of social benefits like supermarket discounts have helped boost membership, the labour movement also realises it cannot ignore its core role: representing workers' interests at the workplace.

NTUC secretary-general Lim Boon Heng believes an NTUC membership has to mean more than just social benefits.

"If we do not provide industrial relations services to those who are in the general branch, then all they look forward to are social benefits," he said at the NTUC's preliminary delegates conference last month.

"Will this be sustainable, with all the other benefits offered in the market? Will they resign their membership the moment a better deal comes along?"

"We need to offer them something more, something that will bind them emotionally to other young members and the

labour movement."

## Re-inventing NTUC

ENTER Young NTUC, the youth wing of the labour movement set up six months ago to recruit more younger members.

Mr Steve Tan, executive secretary of Young NTUC, admits that the labour movement has to re-brand itself.

Even the very name "NTUC" may not be too appealing to the young, he says with a wry smile.

"If you want to be 'in', you can't say it yourself. You need people to believe it is hip. And this requires the right positioning," he says.

Young NTUC is using marketing techniques to reach out to younger workers.

It wants to create niche activities to capture the interest of those who would normally not have given NTUC a second glance, says Mr Tan.

It is targeting young professionals who do not shop at FairPrice, do not own income insurance policies, or want to go to NTUC Club chalets.

To appeal to these yuppies, several clubs have been set up — from travel and movies to

PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN and NTUC wine tasting.

But a pertinent question to ask is: Will offering such social benefits make NTUC into nothing but a big social club?

What do these have to do with the core functions of unions, anyway?

Union leaders say the idea is to attract people to sign up using the lure of benefits such as discounts and club activities, and then "convert" them into union members who believe in the labour cause.

Mr Benjamin Tang, 29, is one example. He joined the Port Offi-

## SMS, e-mail us your views

SHOULD the labour movement use social benefits to lure union members? Are unions still relevant to your life? What else would you like the unions to do? We'd like to hear from you.

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As people move away from permanent, full-time work to what is termed "casual" work, they are likely to need employment services, just that the kind of employment services they need from unions may be changing.

They may no longer need collective bargaining, but will need help to get jobs and training — two areas the NTUC is already active in.

Or they may welcome help to vet employment contracts, advice on what medical benefits schemes to take up, and counsel on how to raise grievances.

As labour economist Professor Chew Soon Beng says: "If unions exist just to protect workers from abuses of employment, the age of unions is over."

Like any key institution in today's world, unions need to re-invent themselves.

If younger workers want travel, movies and club privileges, NTUC is prepared to give them these.

Even as it adds glitz to reel in members, it also cannot forget its core purpose. For in the end, the raison d'être of unions is as relevant today as in the 19th-century age of exploitative capitalists: to safeguard workers' interests at the workplace.

The content of what constitutes safeguarding workers' interests may have changed, but the mission to protect them should surely remain.