

Young Workers Building Stronger Unions



By Gary Sim

They are young, upwardly mobile and they are the ones that the National Trades Union Congress is looking to recruit as members.

Though Singapore has been able to buck the trend of declining union membership, the challenge for the unions lies in attracting younger workers to join its ranks. There is a need to inculcate the culture of adaptability and skills upgrading and retraining in the young.

Furthermore, the youth need to be kept abreast of the developments in the labour market.

With the launch of Young NTUC by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in April last year, the focus has shifted to increasing the involvement of the youth today in the labour movement.

Unions need to give greater emphasis to attracting more workers, especially the young ones, to become union members and play an active role.

The existing experienced union leaders therefore have an important role to play in nurturing promising, capable and committed union activists to become future leaders.

Yet, there is always a danger of not knowing what these younger workers (below 35 years old) want.

So the Singapore Manual and Mercantile Workers' Union's youth chapter, Gen Vibez, is in the midst of coming up with a programme to cater to the needs of its 3,000 to 4,000 younger members.

Gen Vibez Chairman Kevin Choo said that SMMWU Secretary-General John De Payva has given them a "free hand" to "engage" this group.

Said Mr Choo: "By engaging them, I mean, asking them what exactly they want in a union."

This has translated to Gen Vibez sending out survey forms to all of its existing youth members, asking them what programmes or activities they'd like the union to organise for them.

"We're not even going to talk about bread-and-butter issues because I think that should be a given," said Mr Choo.

"All union members will be protected by the union. What matters most now, is what else can we offer them," he added.

Spreading The Good News

Mr Choo wants them to come in from a social note, tell the union what kind of activities they like, and SMMWU will facilitate, and grow from there.

Gen Vibez, he said, would be relying on this word-of-mouth method, where they would first cater to what its existing members want, and rely on them to bring in their friends.

"And the word will go out, that the SMMWU has activities young people enjoy, and they will come," he said.

Mr De Payva is also adamant in giving the youth chapter as much leeway as possible and doesn't want anyone to suggest what kind of activity they should have because "they have ideas of their own".

"So let them suggest and we facilitate," he said

Keppel FELS Employees' Union, which launched its youth chapter, Young KFEU, only in February this year, also has the same concept.

In fact, KFEU General Secretary Attyah Hassan

immediately directed all queries to Young KFEU Chairperson Au Ying Chee, the moment she heard the word "youth".

She said: "Go and talk to Ying Chee. She will handle everything connected to the youth."

With about 100 members in Young KFEU, Miss Au also does not want to emphasise on "heavier topics" like retrenchment, industrial relations or leadership.

This is done in a bid to change people's mindset that joining the union is boring.

"We want them to come in to have fun, and build up the bond amongst themselves first," said the 28-year-old.

And through all these activities, potential leaders can also be unearthed, agreed both Mr Choo and Miss Au.

"When we organise activities, everyone is expected to pitch in. And we can see how capable these people are, and how and if they can be persuaded to take up the cause of the union," she said.

Young NTUC

Said Young NTUC Chairperson Edwin Lye: "We hope that after joining us for these activities, they will form a better understanding of what the labour movement represents and will be motivated to join us to support the cause."

With a base of about 150,000 young members, Young NTUC is, by far, the largest youth movement in Singapore, as compared to the Young PAP or the People's Association's Youth Movement.

Thus, the formation of the Young NTUC is a natural development for the labour movement, as NTUC and affiliated unions need to dovetail their efforts in serving the growing number, interests, and aspirations of younger workers

"Young NTUC's strength is that our members are from the same generation of the people we are trying to reach out to. We understand their needs and grew up in similar circumstances," he added.

Young NTUC Executive Secretary Steve Tan said: "Whereas it might not have mattered to their peers to join the union in the past, the youth chapters can, through their informal lunch sessions or after work get-togethers learn more about their colleagues and plan activities that can reach out to these colleagues."

For example, Young SISEU recently organised a 50 km night cycling session for their younger members.

This may sound daunting but there were about 50 enthusiasts who joined in.

"We see this as a direction that the youth chapters will be heading towards, using activities that appeal to their peers to bring them into the unions," added Mr Tan.

The Young NTUC will also enable younger members and unionists to participate and be involved actively in the various levels and activities of the labour movement.

They can expect to share their ideas, views and concerns with their peers, and with the senior leaders of NTUC and affiliated unions.

"It is this continuing relationship that will ensure the future of the labour movement," said Mr Lye.





Our Young Union Members

Age	Ordinary Branch Members	General Branch Members
16 to 19	419	1,128
20 to 24	8,961	9,509
25 to 29	26,912	22,011
30 to 34	34,545	32,291
Total	135,776	

As of Dec 2005

He added: "My committee is also keenly aware of the need to constantly seek the guidance of our seniors and tap on their experience. The exuberance of youth excels only when complemented with this guidance and experience."

Looking For A Leader

While there have been suggestions that finding enough willing younger leaders would be a problem, Mr De Payva thinks otherwise.

"Is it difficult to find 10, 20 or even up to 50 in a union as big as SMMWU? I don't think so," he said.

That works out to less than one per branch, and the union has 280 branches.

He declared: "So when you break it down, the reality is achievable."

"Even in a period of four years, if every of my branch committees of 280 branches has one vacancy each, I can safely say I can bring in 280 young people into the committee to start with," said Mr De Payva.

"And as we move on, those who have the knack for it, the commitment, dedication, those who feel they want to do something for the workers, they stay on and they move up to be office bearers in the branch," he added. ■

