

5 December 2008

## Media Statement

### THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IS SADDENED BY THE DEMISE OF OUR FIRST PRESIDENT HO SEE BENG

1 The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) is saddened by the passing of our Brother Ho See Beng. We share in his family's grief and wish to express our sincere condolences to them.

2 Brother Ho started his union career when he worked as a proof reader in The Straits Times and was subsequently elected as the Honorary Secretary of the Singapore Printing Employees Union from 1958 to 1961. He left his mark when he battled with the previous colonial management of the newspaper, for better wages and working conditions for workers.

3 Brother Ho's passion and dedication led to his election as NTUC Chairman<sup>1</sup> from 1962 to 1964. During this period, he was among the first three NTUC union leaders<sup>2</sup> to be elected as Members of Parliament in 1963. This further strengthened the symbiotic ties between NTUC and the People's Action Party (PAP), at a time when pro-communist forces posed a strong challenge to the PAP.

4 In Parliament, Brother Ho often spoke up robustly when workers' interests were at risk, including the time when the Government introduced the Employment Act and Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act in 1968 to counter the effects of the British military withdrawal from Singapore, and amended the Trade Unions Act later. He later became NTUC's first President<sup>3</sup> from 1964 to May 1966 and then its Secretary-General from June 1966 to April 1967.

5 Brother Ho will be remembered as a dedicated, respected and yet, fiery union leader. Despite having only a secondary education, he had helmed the NTUC leadership during the tumultuous early years of NTUC's formation when pro-communist elements were abound, industrial relations was chaotic and trade unionism was still at a nascent stage.

6 Under Brother Ho's leadership, the budding NTUC had forged stronger fraternal ties with international trade unions, which helped to garner greater support overseas for the Labour Movement in Singapore. Back home, he cared for the workers on the ground. For example, his objective view of the pirate taxi issue in the

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<sup>1</sup> Brother Mahmood Bin Awang became NTUC's first Chairman when NTUC was established in 1961.

<sup>2</sup> The first three NTUC union leaders to be elected into Parliament were Brother Ho See Beng, Brother Mahmood Awang and Brother Bernard Rodrigues.

<sup>3</sup> Brother C V Devan Nair became NTUC's Secretary-General in 1964.



1960s – balancing the need to end the pirate taxi problem with not depriving the pirate taxi offenders an opportunity to earn a living – added to the voices which led to the establishment of the NTUC Comfort<sup>4</sup> cooperative in 1970.

7 In 1979, Brother Ho was accorded the prestigious Veteran of Labour award during May Day for his invaluable service and contributions to the Labour Movement. These included his involvement in NTUC as its Chairman, President and Secretary-General in the 1960s, and in CASE as Treasurer from 1972 to 1975 and subsequently, as its Vice-President from 1975 to 1979.

8 As the Executive Secretary of the Singapore Port Workers Union (SPWU) from 1982 to June 1984, Brother Ho had helped to further strengthen industrial relations in the port which he once described as “the economic lifeline of Singapore”. He would also be remembered for asking PSA management to raise the status of daily-rated workers by converting them into monthly-rated employees, which was achieved in 1985.

9 Till today, Brother Ho’s legacy in the Labour Movement has touched the lives of many of our union leaders and workers. And yet, union leaders of today and tomorrow have much to learn from veterans like Brother Ho See Beng, whom we will miss deeply.

John De Payva  
President

Lim Swee Say  
Secretary-General

Lim Boon Heng  
Secretary-General  
(1993-2006)

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For media queries, please contact:

Goy Kae Lip  
Assistant Director  
Corporate Communications Department  
National Trades Union Congress  
DID 6213 8184  
HP 9792 0650  
Email [goykl@ntuc.org.sg](mailto:goykl@ntuc.org.sg)

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<sup>4</sup> NTUC Comfort cooperative was corporatised in 1993 and subsequently listed as Comfort Group Ltd on the Singapore Stock Exchange in 1994.