

2 bag top May Day award

Former minister of state and veteran lawyer honoured

■ BY KOR KIAN BENG

RECEIVING the top May Day award this year propelled former minister of state Goh Chee Wee back to 1981 and his first project on joining the labour movement.

He was then part of a team of top National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) leaders in the thick of a high-profile wage dispute between the pilots and management of Singapore Airlines (SIA).

It was a "good learning experience" that stood him in good stead in his almost 30 years of labour-related work, he told *The Straits Times*.

Mr Goh, 63, chairman of NTUC First Campus Co-operative, with veteran lawyer David Wong Chin Huat, 61, a director of the Singapore Labour Foundation (SLF), head the list of 88 recipients of May Day Awards this year.

Both received the prestigious Distinguished Service (Star) awards last night at a May Day dinner. The award is given to non-unionists who made significant contributions to the labour movement. Only four others have received it since 2001.

NTUC, which nominated them, said Mr Goh "took pains to expand NTUC FairPrice, NTUC Foodfare and NTUC Media to where it is today".

FairPrice is a supermarket chain, while Foodfare runs a foodcourt chain and Media does newsletters and publications.

Mr Wong, chairman of One Marina Boulevard (OMB) which houses the NTUC Centre building was credited for helping to level the social divide between rich and poor, and improving workers' employability by placing all service contracts at OMB under a best-sourcing framework.

Mr Goh spent 18 years in NTUC, from 1981 to 1999, in various positions, including deputy secretary-general. He has continued to lead NTUC co-operatives. Between 1993 and 1997, he was minister of state at three ministries: Labour, Trade and Industry, and Communications.

Recalling his SIA experience, he said NTUC leaders had to go "from department to department in SIA" to meet unionists and management staff.

"We heard the grievances of workers and understood the problems of communications between management and unions," he said. "We put up recommendations after a few months of work. That was a good learning experience for me."

He was a deputy director and with Mr Lim Boon Heng, the duo were tasked to help NTUC then-president Devan Nair handle a wage dispute between SIA's pilots and management.

Mr Lim, now a Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, was NTUC's past secretary-general.

Mr Wong, a managing partner of Ramdas & Wong law firm which he co-founded in 1974, felt privileged to receive the award, which he wanted to share with volunteers in the labour movement.

Explaining his involvement with labour work, he said he always felt "an innate empathy with the ground... Many of us came from there and made good because of the many opportunities that were available to us. It is only right that we help create similar opportunities for the next generation".

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