

Mah: I learnt to drive a bus

Minister speaks on winning workers' trust

■ BY KOR KIAN BENG

TO UNDERSTAND the difficulties drivers face in reverse-parking a bus, Mr Mah Bow Tan got behind the steering wheel and learnt to drive the vehicle.

Mr Mah, a Hainanese, also learnt how to swear in Hokkien.

The Minister of National Development did it back in the late 1970s when he was a boss at then-Singapore Bus Service (SBS), the predecessor of SBS Transit.

Yesterday, Mr Mah, now aged 61 and also chairman of the Singapore Labour Foundation (SLF), recounted his first-hand experience and other anecdotes to drive home a point: to win trust, one has to gain respect first.

It is crucial and the swift economic rebound recently bears testimony to its sustained importance, he told about 1,800 workers, union leaders and employers at this year's May Day dinner to laud model employers and workers as well as long-time supporters of labour work in advancing the cause of workers.

Indeed, the deep level of mutual trust and understanding among the tripartite partners was the "most fundamental and abiding" reason for the recovery from last year's recession, he said.

"If anyone thinks that was easy, just look at the

situation in many other countries, where government, employers and unions were locked in conflict, unable to take difficult decisions because they simply did not trust one another," he added.

The dinner was also attended by Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong, and Ministers in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Boon Heng and Mrs Lim Hwee Hua.

Mr Lim Swee Say, secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), gave out awards to a record 88 individuals and companies.

A special award this year, the Upturn The Downturn award, was given to 15 unionists, management individuals and companies for helping to fight the recession last year.

In his speech, Mr Mah said following his involvement with the labour movement, "I have come to appreciate the role they play in fighting for a better life for workers. I have come to admire their qualities of honesty and sincerity, of walking the talk".

Mr Mah was seconded to SBS from the Administrative Service in 1974 and was chairman of NTUC Comfort in the 1980s.

He also spoke on the ties and partnership between NTUC and the SLF, a statutory board that coordinates and channels funds for NTUC to meet the social, economic and educational needs of workers.

It has given about \$150 million in five years for three areas: to improve workers' employability; develop union leadership and staff capacity; and help lower-income union members financially.

Going forward, Mr Mah said SLF will strengthen NTUC social enterprises and boost its ability to serve professionals and executives.

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May Day award winners (from left) Mr David Wong Chin Huat, director of the Singapore Labour Foundation; Mr Tay Kim Poh, HDB CEO; Mr Tong Chong Heong, Keppel Offshore & Marine CEO; Mr Goh Chee Wee, NTUC First Campus Co-operative chairman; Professor Tan Ser Kiat, Singapore Health Services Group CEO; Mr Masatoshi Koike, Murata Electronics managing director; Mr Chan Yoon Kum, assistant chief executive of PUB; and Mr Kua Hong Pak, ComfortDelGro group CEO and managing director. MORE REPORTS: PRIME PAGES A10-11

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