

NTUC will champion workers' interests, foster a 'just transition' into a greener future economy: Ng Chee Meng

NTUC will work to ensure no worker gets left behind.

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In an increasingly unequal, fast-changing world, NTUC will take proactive and pre-emptive measures to transition the country into the future of work, said NTUC Secretary-General Ng Chee Meng.

He shared this at a Jan. 9 address at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) flagship Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference.

This includes three main pillars of action:

1. Championing workers' interests, including PMEs, mature, lower wage, and platform workers.
2. Proactively partnering employers to do more in industry and workforce transformation, especially amid growing fears of being replaced by tech advances.
3. Supporting a "Just transition" into a future, greener economy, where employers focus on navigating the business' transformation, while NTUC focuses on the workforce transformation.

Particularly, NTUC will pay close attention to the concept of work as an integral part of society, with reference to a working person earning a good living.

This is with the purpose of creating "a fair workplace environment where Singaporeans can access good jobs and share in the wealth creation of the country", said Ng.

Navigating change

One major obstacle to work in the near future is technological advancement.

While developments bring with them a plethora of opportunities, they also present challenges, Ng explained, adding that Industry 4.0 "will bring great disruption".

He continued:

"And workers of all collars — including some of you probably in the audience — are concerned about being displaced and replaced by the technological advances in all the different fields.

AI (Artificial intelligence), robotics, the Internet of Things (IoT)... All have the potential for productivity growth.

But from the workers' eyes — "Will I still have my rice bowl?"

In addition, in a world increasingly concerned with climate change, there have been concerns about jobs being replaced or made obsolete.

"This is a hot topic, not just in Singapore, but in the different meetings at the International Labour Organisation," Ng shared.

He spoke about his colleagues based in other parts of the world that are "up in arms and preparing for potential industrial action, to fight against this liberalisation or greening of the economies."

On such uncertain grounds, NTUC will partner employers to help companies navigate these conditions.

The union will also work to foster a just transition into a greener future.

A framework initially championed by labour unions, a just transition aims to help economies move into climate-neutrality while still accounting for the rights and needs of workers.

For instance, union leaders and employers can work together to see how workers can be upskilled or re-skilled to handle new or redesigned jobs.

As a last resort, where jobs are made completely obsolete, NTUC can work with employers to establish a fair retrenchment package and job-matching for workers, be it in the same industry or otherwise.

Bringing ideas from 30,000ft to the ground

A just transition must also have economic transformation in mind — particularly in Singapore, "where the pace of change is relentless", said Ng.

With this transition in mind, NTUC is working closely with Temasek portfolio companies to bring good conceptual ideas to the ground.

He mentioned:

"We all know that there are many good conceptual ideas in the market.

But unfortunately, often these conceptual ideas are at the 30,000ft level up in the air... So Temasek and NTUC want to bring these ideas down to the ground level, to start designing actionable plans that workers and union leaders can understand and move in tandem for the future of work, in the larger economic transformation."

While this is still very much a work in progress, this initiative will help companies succeed in a greener economy while also allowing workers a just transition.

In addition, it will allow employers and NTUC to play to their strengths: the former to focus on navigating their business's transformation, and the latter to focus on workplace transformation.

Ng concluded:

"And in parallel, we make sure that no worker is left behind. Every worker matters.

Importantly, we are keeping our ears open, our feet on the ground, when we have embarked on this 'every worker matters' conversation...to hear from wide spectrums of our population."