

NTUC in talks for progressive wages for plumbers

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SINGAPORE - The labour movement is exploring how the plumbing industry can implement a wage ladder with raises pegged to training and productivity, together with the Singapore Plumbing Society.

“We are working with the Singapore Plumbing Society to see how we can put the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) into this space,” said National Trades Union Congress secretary-general Ng Chee Meng at a conference on Monday.

He said the NTUC’s vision of the PWM extends beyond lower-wage workers whom the model now targets, to technical roles such as lift technicians, who provide an essential service, and solar power engineers in the green economy.

He did not elaborate on the progress of NTUC’s engagement with the plumbing sector.

The Straits Times has contacted the Singapore Plumbing Society for comment.

Referring to vocational trades like plumbing, Mr Ng said: “Will there be a wage ladder for a young person graduating from school to see, ‘If I can do this in five years’ time, in 10 years’ time, I can maybe earn \$6,000 or \$7,000 by my mid-40s if I pursue this profession’? We are trying to paint this space for the young worker.”

But he stressed that the labour movement is not the Government and does not set national policy, including on the scope of the PWM.

Nonetheless, it studies and issues PWM guidelines with employer and government partners that the Government has accepted before.

An example is the PWM for the waste management sector that the Government has proposed for a July launch, after it accepted the Tripartite Cluster of Waste Management’s recommendation for such a model in January 2022.

Mr Ng was responding to a question from an audience member at the three-day Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

He gave a keynote speech and fielded questions on the second day of the conference – which is being held on Jan 5, 9 and 16.

Responding to questions about employment and social welfare for workers with disabilities, Mr Ng said he was inclined to promote work over welfare.

He encouraged the Government to consider bolstering employment support for those with disabilities, “because a person in a job is a productive person (who) has the dignity of work and a sense of social justice”, regardless of his wages, age or disability status.

“I prefer that philosophy than putting more and more money into social welfare without a trampoline effect back into society.”

On the role of unions in the new social compact, Mr Ng said regular strikes, as seen overseas, have happened in Singapore in the past.

Such industrial disharmony could happen again if care is not taken to ensure a fair workplace environment where Singaporeans have access to good jobs and share in the Republic’s wealth, he said.

As Singapore’s economy transforms, unions must increasingly champion the interests of professionals, managers and executives, as well as gig workers, he added.

Mr Ng also said NTUC had a part in fostering a “just transition” to a green economy, which would avoid large-scale and unfair replacement and displacement of workers.

This could be achieved through training workers for both redesigned and newly created jobs, as well as providing workers released from obsolete jobs as a last resort with a fair retrenchment package and matching to new jobs.

To this end, the labour movement recently began working closely with companies in investment firm Temasek’s portfolio to formulate plans that could help them succeed in the green economy while giving workers opportunities to upgrade their skills for new jobs within the companies.

Mr Ng said: “In this initiative, essentially, employers can focus on business transformation, NTUC can help them focus on workforce transformation, and in parallel, we make sure that no worker is left behind.”

He noted: “In my view, in the future of work, just transition concepts and initiatives must be applied beyond the energy sector, into the wider spaces of economic transformation, especially so in Singapore, where the pace of change is relentless.”