

Ng Chee Meng's NTUC deployment shows Govt's continued focus on labour issues: Analysts

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The deployment of an up-and-coming Cabinet minister as the next potential leader of the labour movement reflects the government's continued emphasis on labour issues, said political analysts.

The appointment of Education Minister (Schools) Ng Chee Meng on Monday (April 23) as one of the labour movement's deputy secretaries-general follows a similar path taken by Mr Chan Chun Sing three years ago.

Describing Mr Ng, who is also Second Minister for Transport, as one of the heavyweight ministers among the fourth-generation leaders, the analysts said his National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) appointment paves the way for bigger roles in labour or economy-related Cabinet portfolios in the future.

NTUC said on Monday (Apr 23) that Mr Ng and Senior Minister of State (Trade and Industry and National Development) Koh Poh Koon have been co-opted into its central committee as deputy secretaries-general with immediate effect. Both men entered politics in 2015.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Chan Chun Sing was similarly appointed as NTUC deputy secretary-general in January 2015, before becoming the secretary-general in May that year. The appointment came three years after he entered politics in 2011.

Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan noted Mr Ng's and Mr Chan's deployment to NTUC very early in their political careers. The move to place some of the "high-flying office holders" in the labour movement signals the importance of labour issues and its relationship with the government.

"It shows that the People's Action Party government is keen to work with the trade unions, the rank-and-file and employers to have this very harmonious and productive industrial relationship and for it to continue," said Assoc Prof Tan.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director at the Institute of Policy Studies, said the government is operating under a "new template" with the successive appointments of two "heavyweight ministers" into the NTUC.

"It's a quick way to get a sense of what are the concerns on the ground, among ordinary Singaporean workers. But it is also a quick way to build up political capital on a broad base insofar as the leaders make good their time in NTUC," she added.

While Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao, citing reliable sources, broke the news last month on Mr Ng moving to NTUC, Nanyang Technological University Assistant Professor Woo Jun Jie said the appointments were quite unexpected since Mr Ng and Dr Koh have not spent much time in the labour movement.

Nonetheless, both appointments were "quite fitting" given the challenges Singapore's workers will face, he said.

Mr Ng would have gained some expertise in reskilling workers from his experience in the Education Ministry, while Dr Koh's experience in the trade and industry and national development ministries, as well as his work on the Industry Transformation Maps, will place him in good stead to facilitate any labour transformations, he added.

The analysts expect Mr Chan to step down as labour chief and helm a ministry after the Cabinet reshuffle.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser added: "I reckon Mr Chan was being groomed for higher appointment in his tour of duty thus far through the Ministry of Social and Family Development (social safety net), People's Association (community development), and NTUC (workers' welfare)... The short stint in each suggests breadth of exposure, rather than depth."

If Mr Chan is redeployed out of NTUC, it would suggest the government's inclination to allow as many core leaders as possible to have this exposure in the labour movement, said Assoc Prof Eugene Tan.

"It is perhaps seen as having a very good window to the sort of issues that Singaporeans face in the workforce... even if it's for a relatively brief two-and-a-half to three years, it is seen as impactful and influential in the overall development of a 4G leader," he said.

Mr Chan's stint will be associated with the labour movement's efforts to reach out to the professionals, managers and executives as well as setting up the Training Council to reskill workers, analysts said.

'Genuine heart to listen'

Meanwhile, Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) threw their support behind the appointment of Mr Ng Chee Meng, citing traits that will make him valuable to the NTUC.

Ang Mo Kio MP Ang Hin Kee, who is also deputy chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport, told TODAY Mr Ng has a "genuine heart to listen and empathise with workers".

"We've interacted on multiple occasions due to Mr Ng's portfolio with the Ministry of Transport. I find that he is able to roll up his sleeves to meet drivers on the ground, in hawker centres, where they are most at ease," said Mr Ang.

According to Mr Ang, this ability was most apparent during the recent shake-up of the ride-hailing industry, when Grab's acquisition of Uber's South-east Asia operations sparked fears of displacement and loss of jobs among some private-hire drivers.

"Mr Ng not only came down to talk and hear out the concerns of the drivers, but also made sure to rally the various agencies like the Competition and Consumer Commission of Singapore, Land Transport Authority and Ministry of Manpower, giving assurance to drivers that their concerns were looked into," Mr Ang said, who said Mr Ng's engaged with drivers regularly.

West Coast MP Patrick Tay said Mr Ng's experience in the Education Ministry would add value to labour movement's efforts to reskill and train workers.

Union leaders described Mr Ng as someone who "listens to feedback intently".

President of the National Transport Workers' Union Rosmani Juraini said Mr Ng was "very serious and very firm in his decisions" and listens intently to unionists' feedback.

Mr Ng's appointment comes as no surprise given the speculation in recent weeks, and Mr Rosmani said it was "good to have a change of leadership". He hopes that Mr Ng will engage workers on how to take advantage of, and benefit from, the Industry Transformation Maps.

"I expect Mr Ng to be more on the ground and hands on to understand workers' issues. Feedback sharing should not be restricted to seminars, but I think there should be more work site visits and more engagement with the leaders," said Mr Rosmani.

Amalgamated Union of Public Employees (AUPE) general secretary and NTUC's assistant secretary for financial affairs Yeo Chun Fing said: "I sensed that he is a genuine person from my limited interactions with him. I met him during discussions for the aviation cluster, where union leaders surfaced various issues. Mr Ng was able to convince us that he does take a lot of care to look into those issues... in terms of working to advance the interest of workers in the aviation cluster."

"I think he is able to work with people, and can ease into conversations naturally. At networking sessions, I observed that people are at ease with him," added Mr Yeo.

On whether Mr Ng - who is expected to be elected as NTUC's new chief by the central committee - was experienced enough for the role, the labour MPs said he would be well supported by many others in the team.

"Whoever is the leader, it's a team effort, we have various assistant secretaries-general, deputy secretaries-general and various union leaders, we work as a team to overcome issues together," said Mr Tay.

On Mr Chan's leadership, Mr Ang said: "He continued what has been set in motion in the past and expanded the momentum for the labour movement to be more inclusive, where more types of interests have been looked after."

Describing him as "frank and honest", Mr Yeo said he was upfront with union leaders about disruptions and changes that need to take place.