

NTUC appointment 'shows Govt focus on labour issues'

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The possibility of Social and Family Development Minister Chan Chun Sing, 45, becoming the next labour chief points to the Government's emphasis on labour issues in the coming years, with economic restructuring regarded as one of the most important challenges ahead, political analysts suggested yesterday.

Still, they noted the move's unusual quality: The labour movement is not seen as a traditional post for political high-fliers such as Mr Chan, who was touted as a core member of the People's Action Party's (PAP) fourth-generation leadership when he entered politics.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh said: "It's surprising because we usually assume front runners for (Prime Minister) will be trying many positions in the heavyweight ministries." However, she pointed out, there appears to be a more pressing need for succession in the labour movement.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan said the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) was never "one of the boxes to be checked", compared with ministries such as education, defence, and finance. Mr Chan has only four years of political experience under his belt, but labour chiefs tend to be more senior, he added.

Current NTUC secretary-general Lim Swee Say, along with his predecessors such as Mr Lim Boon Heng, has held the post for several terms. Mr Lim Boon Heng was labour chief for 13 years, before Mr Lim Swee Say took over in 2007. Both did not head heavyweight ministries, with Mr Lim Swee Say serving in the Prime Minister's Office without a portfolio since 2005. Before that, he was Second Minister for National Development from 2004 to 2005.

Although it still remains to be seen whether Mr Chan will indeed be elected to lead the NTUC, Mr Lim Swee Say will not be able to serve another four-year term when his term ends in October, as he turns 62 in July next year. The NTUC's Central Committee — its highest decision-making body — is due for re-election at the NTUC National Delegates' Conference in October.

Other politicians who held the top post at NTUC include the late former President Ong Teng Cheong, who served for several terms before being appointed Deputy Prime Minister, and Mr Lim Chee Onn, who was once described by former Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew as prime minister material and served as Minister without Portfolio. Mr Lim Chee Onn is now a board member of the Monetary Authority of Singapore and Senior International Adviser to the Singbridge Group, a Temasek Holdings company.

With the spotlight on the labour movement as Singapore undergoes economic restructuring, Dr Koh said it is a demanding position where the ruling party would want to put its best man on the job. "If they feel they'd like to test Mr Chan Chun Sing for higher office, then for this time and this

age, this is really an area for a front-runner for (Prime Minister), because the challenge is high, (and he) can really prove his mettle,” she said.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Zulkifli Baharudin said the PAP’s tripartite relationship with workers is not to be underestimated. “I think now, more than ever before, you’ll need the support of the workers, who are very severely affected in many ways. And I think PAP still is a party that has a very strong connection or relationship with the workers, something they wish to guard, something they wish to ensure continues to be strong.”

As for what is next for Mr Lim Swee Say, analysts said they expect him to contest in the next General Election, in keeping with his declaration last year to run in East Coast GRC — his current seat — despite previously requesting to retire from politics.

Assoc Prof Tan said Mr Lim Swee Say is probably needed to anchor the PAP team contesting there and assure voters there of continuity. “In East Coast GRC, they have many plans ahead and voters might be concerned that if the anchor (minister) leaves, some of those plans may not materialise as well,” he said.

“Will he remain in the Cabinet after the next GE? Probably not, given he’s expressed his desire to retire from politics for quite a while. And keeping him on in the cabinet may not speak well of the (leadership) renewal efforts,” he added.