

Without a parliamentary seat, Ng Chee Meng can 'still be an effective labour chief but may not wield same influence'

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- Despite the loss of Sengkang GRC, PAP's Ng Chee Meng will retain his position as Singapore's labour chief, PM Lee had said
- Some analysts are unsure if Mr Ng will have the political clout to represent workers
- Unionists said that Mr Ng was independently elected by the NTUC and the General Election outcome has no bearing on his role
- Unionists also said that they are confident he can continue to be the voice for workers
- One analyst said that Mr Ng may leave NTUC to gain corporate experience before returning to the political arena

One would have to go back about 40 years to find a labour movement chief in Singapore who was not an elected Member of Parliament (MP) or in the Cabinet. But most analysts and unionists interviewed by TODAY believe that Mr Ng Chee Meng would still be able to carry out his role effectively and keep watch over workers' livelihoods during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, even though he is no longer an MP.

Mr Ng and his team lost Sengkang Group Representation Constituency (GRC) to the opposition Workers' Party during the General Election (GE) last Friday.

Still, some analysts said that Mr Ng may not have the same influence he once had without a parliamentary seat and Cabinet appointment.

Before Parliament was dissolved in June for the election, Mr Ng held the position of Minister in the Prime Minister's Office and was MP of Pasir-Ris Punggol GRC. He was moved to head a team to contest in the newly drawn up Sengkang GRC for the July 10 polls.

Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that some people within the labour movement may question just how much Mr Ng can represent their voices as the secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

For instance, Mr Ng would have had access to top-level government discussions before the GE and these insights could benefit NTUC, she said.

Moving ahead, the question now arises over whether he has "enough clout to weigh in, and prevail over government policies", Dr Koh said.

Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah agreed, and said that Mr Ng's effectiveness may be diminished somewhat compared with his time as a Cabinet minister.

"He's no longer at the table to negotiate for workers during Cabinet meetings," the assistant professor of Nanyang Technological University's School of Social Sciences' public policy and global affairs programme said.

Political commentator Eugene Tan, a law lecturer at the Singapore Management University, had a different view, pointing out that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had said at a press

conference after the final election results were announced, that Mr Ng would retain his position as NTUC's chief.

"The Government still endorses Mr Ng as the labour chief... and this helps ensure he's not in the political wilderness," Associate Professor Tan said, adding that NTUC should not be seen as an "inferior tripartite partner" now.

"It would be quite silly for the Ministry of Manpower or the Singapore National Employers Federation to take NTUC with less regard simply because their secretary-general is not a Cabinet minister."

Assoc Prof Tan said that NTUC has been given a key role in protecting Singaporeans who may have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and it is likely that Mr Ng will still be "very much involved" in this.

Addressing Mr Ng's lack of political appointment, Assoc Prof Tan said that this is "not exceptional", citing the example of the late Devan Nair.

Mr Nair had yet to enter politics when he founded NTUC in 1961, and he led the union as its secretary-general up until 1965. Mr Nair took up the position again from 1970 to 1979, before he became Member of Parliament for Anson constituency and then president of NTUC. He had to step down as MP when he was elected by Parliament to be Singapore's third President in 1981.

CLOSE TIES BETWEEN PAP AND NTUC

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and NTUC has had a long and close history with each other.

In the early years after the country's independence, NTUC had a stake in the country's economy and its key objectives were to improve the working conditions and the economic and social status of workers, as well as to promote good industrial relations for the benefit of workers, employers and the economy.

Describing the relationship between the two entities at NTUC's National Delegates Conference last year, PM Lee said that they were "twins" and that the system has allowed workers to have influence and interests within it.

He added that one of the PAP's core missions is to advance the well-being and future of workers, a goal that it has shared with NTUC since the conception of both entities more than 50 years ago.

At the time, unions were part of the struggle against the colonial government, and in their advocacy for better working conditions, they had called for strikes and industrial action.

PAP made common cause with the unions then and the Government represents workers' interests as well.

Many PAP MPs have been in the labour movement, while the role of NTUC's secretary-general has traditionally been held by a full government minister in Cabinet. After Devan Nair, some of the past NTUC chiefs have included Mr Lim Chee Onn, who was Minister without Portfolio at the Prime Minister's Office; former Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng

Cheong; Mr Lim Boon Heng, who was Minister in the Prime Minister's Office; and former Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say.

In late May of 2018, Mr Ng, who was then Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, was elected by the NTUC central committee to be its secretary-general. He replaced Mr Chan Chun Sing who took up the portfolio of Trade and Industry Minister.

Before that, Mr Ng was Education Minister (Schools) and concurrently held the position of Second Minister of Transport.

The next NTUC central committee election is due by 2022.

VOICE OF THE WORKERS

Despite the close ties between PAP and NTUC, Dr Koh said that there is no “knock-on” effect of the GE results to Mr Ng’s standing in NTUC, which is an entirely different institution.

Unionists interviewed by TODAY also stressed that the election process for NTUC’s secretary-general position is completely independent of the PAP.

For instance, they pointed out that Mr Ng was elected by the leaders of the affiliated unions to NTUC and it is an independent, internal process.

Mr Sanjeev Tiwari, general secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Public Employees, said that because of this, Mr Ng’s setback during the GE will not change the support that union leaders have given him.

Ms K Thanalethimi, president of the Healthcare Services Employees' Union (HSEU) and a former Nominated Member of Parliament, said that the main role of NTUC’s secretary-general is to “represent the voices of the workers”.

It should not matter whether the appointment holder has a position in the Cabinet or not, she added.

“What is important for us is to have a chief for the workers.”

Ms Thanalethimi said that Mr Ng’s new situation may even be better for the labour movement because it means he may now devote “100 per cent” of his time to the unions and the workers.

If Mr Ng decides to step down from NTUC on his own, Associate Professor Tan suggested that he may take a similar path as fellow PAP member Ong Ye Kung after the GE held in May 2011.

Mr Ong contested during the watershed election at Aljunied GRC and lost against the Workers’ Party, the first time that the opposition party was able to step out from its traditional stronghold of the single-seat ward of Hougang.

Mr Ong, who started his career as a civil servant, went on to become NTUC’s assistant secretary-general in late 2008 and then deputy secretary-general in June 2011 — about a month after the elections that year — before stepping down in late 2012 to join Keppel Corporation.

Before Mr Ng’s entry into politics during the 2015 GE, he had spent about 29 years in the Singapore Armed Forces where he was a fighter pilot. He eventually rose to become

Singapore's Chief of Air Force in 2009, and subsequently the Chief of Defence Force in 2013.

Referring to Mr Ong's subsequent return to politics after his stint in the corporate world, Assoc Prof Tan said that this could also be a similar arrangement for Mr Ng.

He added: "Mr Ng may take this similar path as well to give himself some corporate experience, which he doesn't have."