

**Speech by The Honorable The Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon at the  
Launch of 'Law Works' at NTUC Auditorium on 19 January 2013,  
Saturday**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to be here this morning to mark the launch of the Law Works 2013 campaign. This is a very significant and important initiative and it rests on a vital, collaborative partnership between the Law Society of Singapore and the NTUC.

When we opened the New Legal Year a fortnight ago, I had the occasion to reflect on the critical role that is played by the legal profession in upholding and safeguarding the rule of law. I said then that law is foundational to society and to liberty. Perhaps, this is nowhere more true or directly applicable than in the context of the workforce. If the law can safeguard one's opportunity to work and earn a living, to provide for oneself and one's family and to do this within a framework that is fair and non-discriminatory then it fulfils an extremely worthwhile purpose. But the best legal framework in the world serves no purpose if those for whose benefit it exists are unaware of it.

The object of Law Works 2013 is to ensure that this is not a fate that befalls us and it sets out to accomplish this by highlighting the truth that we do in fact have such a framework, and by taking steps to ensure that this is brought home to our workforce. It has always been one of the Law Society's objectives to impart knowledge of the law to members of the public; and to provide assistance to those who face legal issues but may not have the financial means readily to afford the services of lawyers. This is a noble quest. It is an especially important one in the context of employment law because this is not some esoteric corner of the law that affects only a narrow sector of society. Rather, employment law is an area that is of interest and relevance to our entire workforce.

The Singapore workforce presently exceeds 2 million people. Our workforce constitutes our principal national resource; and our employment laws have direct

relevance to the lives of all workers. The law has grown more complex over time and this is no less true in relation to employment law, particularly as the range of issues affecting employment has become ever broader. As a result, the law can at times seem intricate; even obscure from the perspective of non-lawyers. This is what has brought the Law Society and NTUC together in this commendable collaboration.

Law Works 2013 sees two important organisations working as one for the sake of helping the community. Members of the Law Society are in a position to provide the required legal expertise on employment law issues. But they do not have ready access to the many channels that can ensure that their efforts do reach the workforce where the efforts are most needed. This is where the NTUC with its vast outreach plays a critical role.

Moreover, the NTUC, with its 61 affiliated unions and membership of more than 700,000, has a much clearer sense of the pressing issues that concern workers. Thus, it is the NTUC that has identified specific groups of workers, such as female workers and freelance workers that face particular legal issues. Female workers, as a group, account for more than 40% of the workforce, but many in this group remain unclear on such basic matters as the full extent of their entitlement to maternity benefits. Freelance workers are similarly situated albeit that they face different sorts of issues. Indeed, this is a group that tends to fall between the cracks because of inadequate or casually drafted contractual arrangements or because of a lack of clarity as to their status, and specifically whether they are employees or independent contractors simply providing a service. These vital groups of workers would benefit from concerted efforts to enhance their awareness of the law.

This collaboration is also very timely because of recent or imminent legislative changes. In 2012, in response to the demographic changes of our society brought about by an ageing population, the Retirement and Re-Employment Act was passed. The Act which obliges employers, in certain circumstances, to re-employ workers up to the age of 65, is one that significantly benefits employees.

Further, the Ministry of Manpower is currently in the process of reviewing the Employment Act. The proposed amendments include extending the coverage of the Act so that the rights conferred by the Act may be extended to more employees. The Act already deals with a broad range of issues and there are proposals to include further measures to safeguard workers' rights.

Amidst these changes to the labour laws, it is critical that workers be made aware of not only the **existing** legal position, and equally that they are apprised of such **changes**. The focus of the labour laws is firstly to safeguard the interests of workers by conferring rights upon them, and secondly to enable them to understand their obligations and responsibilities in the workplace. Thus will we see the further growth and development of an effective and competitive workforce.

Law Works 2013 features an ambitious suite of measures aimed at educating workers on employment law issues. During the course of a year long campaign, we can expect to see the publication of a 10-part quick guide, on-site legal clinics where workers will have the opportunity to engage in a face-to-face consultation with practising lawyers on specific legal issues and the issuance of legal primers that will elaborate on the key topics of the moment.

This collaboration provides another vital avenue by which practising lawyers may put something back into society. I am delighted that these two organisations have come together for this extremely valuable cause and I wish the campaign every success in the coming year.

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