

Unions will be tough testing ground, say observers

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NEWS ANALYSIS

RALLYING workers amid slowing wage growth and painful economic restructuring will be a key challenge facing Social and Family Development Minister Chan Chun Sing as he prepares to become the next labour chief, political observers and MPs said yesterday.

The growing complexity of workers' issues and the requirements of a role that demands persuasive charisma as much as policy smarts make the NTUC a tough testing ground for a man also at the core of the next generation of Singapore's leaders.

"The labour movement is entering a critical phase and labour issues now impact on many different facets, from productivity to immigration," said Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan.

"For someone likely to take a bigger leadership role in the future, the exposure in the labour movement would benefit the Cabinet and it would also let him connect with more Singaporeans."

Added Marine Parade GRC MP and NTUC FairPrice chief executive Seah Kian Peng: "NTUC's representation now covers a much bigger group, with SMEs coming into the fold. And when there are different groups, they will have

different needs and concerns, so the complexity just multiplies."

Others said the role of labour chief is an unconventional stop on the way to a top post in government. Several previous occupants came into the post after relatively long connections with unions.

Current NTUC secretary-general Lim Swee Say was deputy-secretary general from 1997 to 1999 before stints as Environment Minister and Second Minister for National Development. He became secretary-general in 2007.

In Mr Chan's case, he entered politics in 2011 and has helmed his ministry only from 2013.

"NTUC is not traditionally seen as the training ground for something bigger, but we don't have that many examples to go by," said NUS political science academic Reuben Wong. "The question is, is (Mr Chan) being prepared for something bigger?"

With political renewal now having to take place in a compressed timeframe, the answer may lie in his performance as the expected next labour chief, observers said.

A key test is if he can go beyond being a good technocrat and mobilise the ground, they added.

"The importance of the union in winning the vote for the PAP cannot be underestimated," said former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin. "The ability to bring in votes and mobilise public opinion is what matters."

The union testing ground has

yielded mixed results.

Mr Lim Chee Onn, who was labour chief from 1979 to 1983, had a difficult relationship with the rank-and-file and asked to leave the position. In contrast, Mr Ong Teng Cheong, who succeeded Mr Lim, went on to become Deputy Prime Minister in 1985. He wore both hats until 1993, when he resigned to run for President.

Mr Chan's imminent move also opens up the position in the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). He is also Second Minister for Defence.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a Facebook note last night that he would announce who would fill the vacancies after the Budget debate.

Observers said Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Grace Fu is a possible candidate for the MSF. She is also Second Minister for Foreign Affairs and Environment and Water Resources.

"Chun Sing left a strong foundation for the next minister in a society where there is rapid ageing, declining birth rates and an increasing gap between those who are skilled and mobile and those who are not," said MP Denise Phua, who heads the government parliamentary committee on social and family development.

"The next minister should be a right balance of competence and compassion."

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