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BOTH MEN TO REMAIN AS CABINET MINISTERS

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Chan Chun Sing expected to succeed Lim Swee Say as labour chief in surprise move

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SINGAPORE – Social and Family Development Minister Chan Chun Sing was unveiled yesterday as the man expected to take over the reins from labour

chief Lim Swee Say, in a move that political observers greeted with surprise.

Joining the labour movement immediately, Mr Chan, 45, will be appointed deputy secretary-general on Tuesday, when he is co-opted into the National Trades Union Congress' (NTUC) central committee. He will serve on a part-time basis for now, and full-time from April 1.

Both Mr Chan and Mr Lim will remain as Cabinet ministers, with a Cabinet reshuffle on the cards after



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Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong

the Budget session next month. The move came following a request from the NTUC central committee yesterday to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, asking Mr Chan to join it.

Committee members, including the president and secretary-general, must step down when they reach the statutory retirement age of 62 to make way for younger successors. The current committee's term ends in October and Mr Lim will be unable to serve another

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full term as he turns 62 next July. The committee said after careful deliberation, it unanimously agreed that Mr Chan is a suitable Cabinet minister “who can strengthen ... leadership at the NTUC and the link between the labour movement and the Government”.

Writing on Facebook, Mr Lee said he immediately agreed. “I support their choice. Tripartism is a key asset of Singapore and Chun Sing has a contribution to make,” he added. Mr Lee noted that there would be gaps to fill when Mr Chan — who is also Second Minister for Defence — joins the NTUC full-time. “I will announce Cabinet changes to fill the vacancies after the Budget session. Both Chun Sing and Swee Say will remain in the Cabinet,” he said.

About 200 union leaders were informed of the move at a gathering held at the NTUC Centre. Mr Chan, who is currently chairman of the advisers to the taxi drivers' union, was presented to the unionists by Mr Lim and NTUC president Diana Chia. In a short speech, Mr Chan gave the union leaders the full flavour of his down-to-earth ways, describing himself as very straightforward and simple.

He said he would visit and chat with unionists in the next few months to listen to their ideas and concerns. “I’m not an expert in the labour movement. I come in, like they say, with a P-Plate,” he quipped, referring to the probation-



ary plate used by new drivers.

He added that he never dreamt of becoming a minister, wanting only to be a librarian when he was a child, when he would visit the former Stamford Road library to read books his single-parent household could not afford. “My philosophy in life is that I will try my best,” he said. “Coming to the labour movement, the aim remains unchanged. I hope all our Singaporeans, all our workers will be able to enjoy good opportunities, a better quality of life.”

Mr Lim did not disclose his plans, only voicing his support for Mr Chan as he warned that global competition for jobs and wages will intensify in the next few years. “He’s young, he’s capable. Most importantly, he cares,” said Mr Lim of his colleague.

Speaking to reporters later, Mr Chan said it was premature to talk

Mr Lim Swee Say (left), who will be unable to serve another term as he turns 62 next July, has voiced his support for Mr Chan Chun Sing.

PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN



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Mr Chan Chun Sing

about his priorities for the labour movement, adding that he would first get to know the union leaders.

Asked about his impending departure from the Ministry of Social and Family Development, Mr Chan said it would be with “a tinge of sadness”, but added that the team would be in good hands. Union leaders threw their weight behind Mr Chan. The NTUC central committee deliberated for some time to choose the best candidate, said NTUC assistant secretary-general Zainal Sapari, who is also a Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

General secretary of the National Transport Workers Union Fang Chin Poh felt Mr Chan would empathise with workers and understand issues confronting low-income families. Mr Fang, who had received a call from Mr Chan in 2013 to speak at a People’s Action Party event, said: “I know he’s got no airs.”

Traditionally, the post of labour chief is an important political appointment given the close relationship between the ruling People’s Action Party and trade unions. Still, the deployment of Mr Chan — who has been touted by political pundits as a possible future Prime Minister — to the labour movement was surprising for some political analysts.

“NTUC has never been seen as one of the boxes to be checked. Typically, it would be education, defence, trade and industry, finance. So in a way, Mr Chan’s appointment is counter-intuitive”, said Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan. **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY**

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