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SINGAPORE—Despite the recent high-profile departures of two defeated People's Action Party (PAP) candidates to the private sector — Mr Ong Ye Kung, 43, and Mr Desmond Choo, 35 — the labour movement remains a fertile and effective training ground for potential candidates for the ruling party, political analysts and labour Members of Parliament (MP) said.

However, for some analysts, the latest departures have revived the perennial question of whether the PAP needs to relook its strategy of parachuting potential political candidates into the labour movement. They felt that the question has to be answered more urgently now, given the keen competition for talent from the private sector — which would make it harder for the labour movement to hold on to defeated candidates — and a more demanding electorate which could increasingly require politicians who have significant experience in mobilising workers.

National University of Singapore political scientist Billeer Singh said: "What (PAP) must change is to throw away its practice of helicoptering someone into the labour force and assume that just because now she or he is from the NTUC (National Trades Union Congress), that person is representing labour."

He added: "With greater politicisation of almost every issue in the coun-

RECRUITMENT OF CANDIDATES

Labour MPs — Time for PAP to relook strategy?

MPs, analysts divided over practice of parachuting prospective candidates into NTUC after departure of losing candidates Ong and Choo from the labour movement



(From left) Mr Desmond Choo, Mr Ong Ye Kung and Dr Janil Puthuchery were introduced as PAP candidates in the 2011 General Election. TODAY FILE PHOTO

try, you will need politicians and not administrators in Singapore. If you want politicians then you cannot be dropping them from the helicopters anymore."

Mr Ong left the Civil Service and joined NTUC in 2008. Earmarked as a potential NTUC Secretary-General,

Mr Ong was part of the PAP Aljunied GRC team that lost in the 2011 GE. He left NTUC in November for the private sector.

Mr Choo — who quit the police force to join the labour movement in 2010 — lost in the 2011 GE as well as the Hougang by-election about a year

later. He told the media about three weeks ago that he would be leaving NTUC for the private sector at the end of this month.

Alluding to past PAP politicians, such as Mr G Kandasamy and Mr Devan Nair, who made their mark as unionists before they became politicians, Associate Professor Singh said the ruling party should adopt a strategy of recruiting "dedicated labour leaders who have served for years" into politics.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan argued that "parachuting" potential candidates into the labour movement would have "decreasing efficacy". Assistant Professor Tan, who is also a Nominated MP, said: "It will sit uncomfortably and perhaps at odds with the growing need for labour MPs to have authority and authenticity which can come about only through being an organic part of the labour movement."

He added: "There will be a patent and urgent need to relook the existing practice of parachuting if the symbiotic relationship between the PAP and NTUC is to remain purposeful."

Labour MPs whom TODAY spoke to disagreed with the analysts. Among other things, they argued that the time spent in the labour movement should not be used as the sole measure of commitment to the cause.

Marine Parade GRC MP Seah Kian Peng, who joined NTUC in 1992 — about 14 years before he stood for election, pointed to the "very good" track

record of the labour MPs. He said: "To me, it's more important (to ask): Do they have the calibre? Do they have the heart? Do they have the passion and do they have the traits to be a good labour MP?"

He reiterated that the labour movement is a "good place to gain experience from" for anyone who wants to "feel the pulse of the ground, feel the pulse of the workers". "That is good for any leader because you are exposed to the issues on the ground and union leaders tell it as it is," he said.

WORKERS' ISSUES – THE ESSENCE OF S'PORE POLITICS

Historically, the labour movement has enjoyed healthy representation in Parliament. In fact, as Assoc Prof Singh put it, "the essence of the PAP is about the labour movement". "Its survival was about fighting and winning the struggle in the labour movement," he added. "The labour movement is the centre of gravity of Singapore politics — whoever controls and have the support of the labour force will control Singapore politics."

At the last General Election in 2011, 14 PAP candidates — including Mr Ong and Mr Choo — represented the labour movement. This excluded those who previously had worked in NTUC, such as Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Manpower and Education) Hawazi Daipi and Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng.

Among the labour MPs currently in the House, at least a third did not have a long association with the labour movement before they entered politics.

In a letter to the press in March 2011 — responding to a reader's letter which questioned the large number of MPs from the NTUC — then-NTUC President John De Payva and NTUC Secretary-General Lim Swee Say said that these MPs "give workers a voice in Parliament and make NTUC a more effective labour movement". "As NTUC nurtures promising candidates for selection by PAP, we also recruit potential PAP candidates who can contribute to the labour movement. Such a two-way approach has served our workers and union members well," they added.

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Ang Hin Kee, who was the Chief Executive of the Employment and Employability Institute (e2i) — a labour movement initiative — for five years before he was fielded in the 2011 GE, reiterated the need to "further the interest of our workers".

He added: "All of us (in the labour movement) try to be as effective as we can to represent the needs of our workers... Now whether they serve as a staff or as a labour MP, that's beside the point. The question is can we induct more people to understand the need to further the interest of our workers on the ground."

Mr Seah pointed out that talent would "always be sought after". "Some stay in the labour movement longer, some move on. But even those who have moved on, they would have

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Mr Seah Kian Peng
MARINE PARADE GRC MP

spent a valuable part of their time with the labour movement. And for many of them, if you talk about Ong Ye Kung or Desmond, I know their heart is still with the labour movement and they're still helping out in different capacities."

Mr Ong joined Keppel Corporation as its Director of Group Strategy and Development in January. Speaking to TODAY, he said that he is still involved in the labour movement through his capacity as the Chairman of e2i and

the adviser to two unions. Mr Choo could not be reached for comment by press time.

Asst Prof Tan said that he would not be surprised "if we see more labour MPs in the next GE" if the recruitment efforts in the other traditional hunting grounds prove "less fruitful".

"This is particularly important at a time when the PAP needs to burnish its pro-worker credentials," he said.

Noting that both Mr Ong and

Mr Choo were "examples of the 'conversion' to unionists in a top-down rather than a bottom-up manner", Asst Prof Tan said: "The PAP needs to have rank-and-file, from the ground-up unionists as well as high-flier MPs deployed as unionists. In recent years, the balance has been tilted more towards the latter group ...

"The challenge for the PAP is to get the balance right so that its pro-worker credentials and identity do not become hollow."