

The Straits Times, 2 February 1980, Page 6

The RISE and FALL of Phey Yew Kok

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The RISE and FALL of Phey Yew Kok



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By

The best and worst time

He climbed from the humble job of an office clerk to that of a leader of Singapore's three "millionaire" unions — Silo, PIEU, and Satu. And almost overnight, he plummeted from his pinnacle as the Republic's second most powerful trade unionist to the depths of a fugitive. This special feature traces the union career of Phey Yew Kok and reveals a multi-faceted man.

What they say about Phey

‘ To Devan, Phey could do no wrong.
— a friend.

I found him a good and conscientious worker during our early days at Satu.

— Mr Clarence de Silva

He is most illogical, unreasonable and unforgiving towards people he cannot tolerate. ’

— a unionist.

WHEN Phey Yew Kok reached the peak of his trade union career in 1970 on becoming the president of the National Trades Union Congress, he also experienced bad moments in his union life.

Hired thugs attacked him twice that year and in one incident, his face was slashed with a razor that left a 7½ cm scar on his face.

Five people were convicted for their role in the attacks, three of them employees of the then Malaysia-Singapore Airlines where Phey was also employed and was their union chief.

Infighting

The slashing incident occurred on June 21, 1970. Phey was leaving for work in the morning when four men pounced on him in the carpark outside his Stirling Road flat.

One kicked him in the back while another slashed him on the right cheek and then fled.

The public prosecutor described the attacks on Phey as attempts to erode his popularity and position and that they were part of a plot using violent opposition against him.

Later, an executive committee member of Satu was charged with criminal conspiracy and assaults on Phey allegedly over union infighting.

He was acquitted of the charges.

"FROM tiger to mouse"
— that's how a fellow unionist described the rise and fall of trade unionist-politician Phey Yew Kok.

As the second most powerful man in Singapore's labour movement, the clerk-turned-union leader was very much the tiger — president of the National Trades Union Congress at 35, and elected into Parliament at 38.

And a mouse he now seems — a fugitive at 45, wanted for evading trial on six charges of corruption involving over \$100,000 in union funds. More charges were expected to be preferred against him the day his case came up for mention, Jan 7.

By his disappearance, Phey left his ballors \$95,000 short, and many questions unanswered in the minds of both workers and Singaporeans at large; questions that probe not only Phey the man but also the system under which he operated.

Talking to his friends and colleagues, and

watching him at work over the years, one gets two opposing profiles of the man: Phey the soft-spoken, kind and considerate friend, and Phey the arrogant and ambitious man.

Kind

Both profiles, it would seem, were equally accurate. To those who liked him as a friend and respected him as an elder, he was a kind, hospitable and good-natured. Journalists too, found him a good PR man. Although publicity-shy, he treated journalists well at press conferences and obliged their requests for statements and comments.

Several officials of affiliate unions found Phey a friend and sought his advice and support in times of industrial strife.

But he could also be rough on those who crossed his path. Said a unionist: "He is most illogical, unreasonable and

unforgiving towards people he cannot tolerate."

Phey's problem was an inability to respond objectively to disagreements with his methods or decisions. His was a take-it-or-leave-it attitude and this eroded the otherwise strong confidence many had in him and support they were willing to give, confided a fellow MP.

Staff of the Singapore Industrial Labour Organisation (Silo) of which he was secretary general, have mixed feelings about Phey.

To some, he was a good and kind boss. And like other bosses, he had his "favourites" and those whom he "marked."

Phey had an "inner circle" of employees in whom he had full trust, which may explain why there were those concerned enough to collect money to help Phey finance the legal battle that most people thought he was preparing for.

But there were several unionists who accuse him of being vindictive and personal whenever there was a clash of opinions.

One senior Silo official found himself without a position after a series of personal differences between him and Phey. He eventually took the hint and resigned from Silo.

A senior NTUC official is said to have been removed from a committee because "he asked too

many questions about certain Silo operations involving Phey," according to a source.

Whichever of the two sides was the real Phey — or perhaps both profiles were — the man was an

effective union leader.

He was largely responsible for building up Singapore's two biggest industrial unions — Silo and the Pioneer Industries Employees' Union.

He became general secretary of Silo in 1970, followed a month later by his appointment as NTUC's president.

From a membership of only 5,000 that year, Phey built up Silo to its present strength of 60,000 — an achievement due mainly to his persistence and organisational skills.

Born in 1934 into a humble home, Phey once said life was a struggle for him from his school days.

In an interview with Malay Mail in 1970, soon after becoming NTUC

president, he said: "I drifted from school to school and worked in between to support myself."

Educated first in the Chinese stream before switching to an English stream secondary school, Phey was fluent in Mandarin, which helped launch him into his powerful trade union posts and later his political appointments.

His proficiency in Mandarin also brought him strength in his main power base, the industrial and bus workers. The champion of workers, Phey organised roadside canteens for the bus workers and ensured they got proper toilet facilities at bus depots. He often joined them for a cuppa at these stalls.

He also sat with professionals and management executives on several boards as director.

Phey was the first unionist appointed director in the Singapore Bus Service

when it was restructured and went public in 1978.

His union career was spectacular.

An accounts clerk with Malaysia-Singapore Airlines when he joined the Singapore Air Transport Union (Satu), then under a different name, he was elected as a member in 1960, to the union's executive committee with the help of the then secretary general, Mr Clarence de Silva.

Then, Phey climbed the ranks and became treasurer and then president of Singapore's major airline workers' union in 1968.

Reappointment

Resentment

By then he had also progressed in his job and was promoted to the planning department of Singapore Airlines, the successor to MSA.

It was at a gathering of affiliates of the international Transport Workers Federation in Singapore some time in 1969 that Mr C.V. Devan Nair took an interest in him and from then on guided him to prominence.

So close was their relationship in the years that followed that a friend said: "To Devan, Phey could do no wrong." With Devan as his mentor, Phey landed the top NTUC job as well as the Silo and PIEU posts in 1970.

That was the year Phey came into the national limelight. But it was also the year he will remember for more than his rapid ascend in the trade union movement.

By then resentment against him had built up so much that he was attacked and his life threatened. Said an active unionist of those days: "If the culprits did not do it then, there would have been many other airport workers willing to bash Phey up."

How did so much hate get generated for a man who was apparently only doing good for the workers?

As one Satu member saw it, Phey's arrogance and unpleasantness surfaced during his early years in Satu.

"Several attempts were made to overthrow Phey and Satu in those days was divided into two camps — a pro-Phey and an anti-Phey one," he said.

The resultant infighting led to the attacks on Phey, prompting the NTUC to blame the assaults on gangsters hired by "opposition factions" in the labour movement.

In fact the NTUC was correct. Those found guilty of the attacks on Phey were airport workers, all employees of MSA and members of Satu and two others described in court as "hired thugs."

The story of a plot against Phey was narrated in court when the public prosecutor brought charges against the three airport workers for caus-

ing hurt to Phey and in another case against the two thugs involved in the same incident.

The court was told of two incidents. In the first in 1969, Phey was slashed on the right thigh. The second and more violent attack took place seven months later. Phey was kicked in the back and slashed on the right cheek with a razor. (See caption story.)

Ambitious

The court cases threw up some interesting details of the power struggle in Satu and reasons for resentment against Phey.

One of the airport workers said in court that Phey "persecuted" him and others because they belonged to the camp opposing Phey.

The slashing incident did not prevent Phey from gaining further heights in his climb up. In 1971, he was awarded the Public Service Star and the following year, he won in the general election to become MP for the newly created Boon Teck constituency.

Four years later, he was returned in the same constituency. Party work-

ers say he was keen on his job as an MP but later spent more time on his union work.

Union sources say that as an MP, Phey was even more ambitious than before. He was elected general secretary of Satu in 1977 when Mr Clarence de Dilva gave up his position at Satu and took up an NTUC post as secretary for recreation and welfare projects.

When asked recently, Mr de Silva, an NTUC central committee member for the past 14 years, said that with hindsight, he now thought that Phey was a very difficult person to judge.

"I found him a good and conscientious worker during our early days at Satu." But he agreed that many union members found him arrogant and Phey earned himself many enemies. By the end of 1978 Phey had under his control a trade union membership that constituted nearly half the total strength of the entire 230,000 force of the NTUC and its 59 affiliates.

He also had by then complete control of the

wealth created through the largest set-up of cooperative ventures ever achieved by NTUC affiliates, including 19 supermarkets, a printing press, a canteen division, a trading and home furnishing division, a home appliances centre and an

import and export division, and the Big Splash, bought by the three unions for \$4.3 million.

Phey was able to go on this expansion spree without any controls as NTUC affiliates have no obligations to the national centre except for a levy they have to pay from membership fees collected by every union.

Control

Top leaders in the NTUC are concerned about this and they may have to re-examine not only the constitutions of the cooperatives of affiliates but also find some constitutional devices to exert some form of control over the affiliates.

Meanwhile, they can do little about their former and floundering leader, whose whereabouts even his family is apparently ignorant of.

Phey's schoolteacher wife and three school-going children — two boys and the youngest, a girl — await in their semi-detached home in Lorong Ong Lye, off Pava Lebar Road for news.

When they moved there from their simple Stirling Road home, Phey was on his way up the trade union ladder. Little did they realise then that the day would come when he would not be there to share its shelter.





Phey ... top union leader to fugitive

